No.573 DECEMBER 21, 1907 5 CENTS

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

PETERS, THE SHREWD CROOK

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1907, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C.*

No. 573. NEW YORK, December 21, 1907. Price Five Cents.

Peters, the Shrewd Crook

Sat. Mch. 23, 1918.
Sun Oct. 15, 1922.

OR,

NICK CARTER'S MALIGNANT FOE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

"RATS ABUNCH. THAT IS, A BUNCH UH RATS; SEE?"

A small, prematurely aged youth who might have been eighteen or twenty-eight—or even older still—if one judged his age from the appearance of his tightly drawn skin and the unwholesome pallor of it, stepped out from the midst of several others of his kind who were grouped together on a corner, and confronted Nick Carter, who was passing at the moment.

The young tough's features suggested a rat, and this appearance was heightened by the little, beady, ferret-like eyes, set so close together as to give him a decided sinister expression.

He separated himself from the group around him as Nick Carter approached, and stepping quickly forward, confronted the detective; and there was a strange expression, half of fear and half of defiance, upon his rat-like face.

"You're Nick Carter, ain't you?" he demanded.

"Yes," replied the detective quickly. "Who told you so?"

"You was pointed out to me."

"Oh! was I? By whom?"

"That don't cut no ice, mister. Leastwise that ain't what I'm here to tell you."

"No? What do you wish to tell me?"

"I've got a message for you—if you're sure enough Nick Carter."

"I am. The man who pointed me out to you made no mistake."

"I reckon not, boss. He ain't one as makes 'em, regular."

"Well, what is the message, and who is it from?"

"I'll answer the last one of them questions first, if it's all the same to you."

"Just as you please, only be quick about it."

"The message is from a man who said you knowed him by the name of Peters."

"Ah!" half-exclaimed the detective. He was interested at once, for that name not only conveyed considerable intelligence to the detective, but it brought back to him many a scene he had passed through quite recently.*

It brought back all the experiences he had passed through at Mulvaney's Cover, now destroyed, for Peters had been one of the cleverest criminals of all that gang

*See Nos. 571 and 572 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

he had had to do with in connection with his Criminal Trust cases.*

"Where is Peters now?" he asked of the tough, who was grinning at him, as if he had seen and realized the impression that the mere mention of Peters' name made upon the detective.

"He said you'd ask that," grinned the youth. "I was to answer that it was none of your business; that's what he told me to say, you know. But honest, I don't know, so you needn't go for to get rooty at what I say."

"All right. What is the message?"

"It is a long one. He told me to ask you first if you suppose he was in prison yet?"

"I hadn't heard to the contrary," replied the detective, "and therefore if I gave the subject a thought at all, it was to suppose that he was still in prison."

"Well, he ain't."

"So I gathered from the remarks you have already made."

"He flew the coop."

"I guessed that, too. How did he do it?"

"He didn't tell me that."

"No? I am waiting rather patiently to hear what he did tell you."

"He got out night afore last; jest walked out, so he said—but I reckon there was some cash used in the transaction."

"Well?"

"He told me to tell you that he was onto his job now."

"He always was that."

"He has got it in for you, too."

"That isn't news, my lad. What's the message?"

"He told me to tell you that he was going to 'do' you."

"Did he tell you how?"

"No."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said you chased him across a lot of roofs, down through the subway, and through a whole lot of other places, until finally you nabbed him and took him in. Is that right, boss?"

"It's about correct; yes——"

"He told me to tell you that he didn't lose no time in making his arrangements to get out, the minute you had him there; and to say that now he had only one object in life, which was and is that same that I mentioned only a minute ago, which was to the effect that he is going to 'do' you the first chanct he gits."

"I've got that down. What more?"

"Well, there was a lot more, but it was all about the same thing. It is like that song you have heard sung which has ninety-seven verses, and they omit ninety-six of them because they are all so much like the first one. You've heard it, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Peters has got his mad clear up about something. He's got the tol-rols for fair. You could see blood in his eye while he was talking about you, and say, mister, if I was you I'd keep a weather eye open for squalls as long as he's out and active. There'll be something doing, and don't you forgit it."

"I suppose so."

"Peters ain't no wind-bag. When he says something's doing, it generally is."

"I know it."

"And he's sure got it in for you, Mister Carter."

"What else did he say about it?"

"Well, he said a lot. He said he was going to get you if he had to go to the chair for it, and I reckon he meant it."

"No doubt. Do you happen to know *how* he is going to do it? Is it to be gun-play, a knife, a slung-shot, brass knuckles—or what?"

"Mister, you can search me. I don't know; but I suppose it would be any one of 'em that happened to come the most handy at the time."

"Very probably."

"He sure frothed at the mouth while he was talking—and then some more. He's bad medicine from way back, is Peters."

"How long ago is it since you saw him?"

"Well, it ain't so very long."

"Not more than a few minutes, is it?"

"You're a good guesser."

"He pointed me out to you while I was walking down the street, and then got out of the way himself, didn't he?"

"I wasn't to say anything on that point, mister."

"All right; you needn't. Which house did he enter, in getting out of the way?"

"I couldn't tell you that, because I done as he told me, and turned my back."

"But it wasn't far from here, was it?"

"It couldn't ha' been very far from here, I reckon."

"You're a strange sort of a young chap, my lad. What is your name?"

"I'm called Rats—I guess maybe it's because I look like a rat."

"How old are you?"

"I dunno. Twenty-one, or two, I reckon."

"You seem to have a strange mixture in that talk of yours. There is something of the South in it, something of the West, and there is a touch of the sea."

"Well, maybe that's all right, too. You see when I was a kid I lived in Baltimore. I runned away to sea, from there, and was afore the mast for a time. Then I deserted a ship I was on, in 'Frisco, and later I punched cows for a while, up in Montana. From that I drifted here to little old New York about a year ago; so you

*The Criminal Trust stories are Nos. 568, 569, and 570 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

see I've seen some of the world, even if I am nothing but a kid."

"Where did you make the acquaintance of Peters?"

"Over on 'the island.' He got thirty days for a spree, when the judge didn't know who he was. He said he'd ha' got thirty years if the judge had half-guessed about him."

"How long ago was that?"

"About six months."

"And was to-day the first time you have seen him since that time?"

"Oh, no; but say, mister, I ain't goin' to give nothin' away about Peters. That ain't in the game, and besides, I promised him that I wouldn't. You can ask me anything you like about me own self."

"Have you ever seen me before, Rat?"

"Nope. Not that I know of."

"You have heard about me, haven't you?"

"Betcher life I have."

"How would you like to have me for a friend, Rats?"

The young man shook his head.

"It wouldn't do nohow," he replied slowly. "I'd sure be up against it if I was to do anything in that line. You wouldn't have me for a friend unless I'd do things to assist you, and I couldn't do that without going back on my pals, and I never do that. No, sirree, I reckon we're better off as we are—with jest a speaking acquaintance. Besides, I suppose that some day you'll get me, and I don't want to ask or give any favors, if that happens."

"You are a strange young man."

"Yes, sir. I have been told that before."

"If you have adopted the life and following of a criminal, you have done it with your eyes open. You are too smart not to have realized the consequences."

"I'm always willing to take my medicine, when it comes, if that's what you mean."

"You must have another name than Rats."

"If I have, I don't know it. When I was a kid in Baltimo', they called me Ratty; later on, it was Rat and Rats. When I went to sea, I had to sign articles, of course. I couldn't write then, so told 'em to just put it down as Rats. They said I had to have a first name, and I told 'em that was it, so they wanted a second name, and I gave 'em one."

"What was it?"

"Abunch. How's that? Rats Abunch; eh? In other words, a bunch uh rats. Anyhow, that's the only name I know of that's mine. Sometimes the boys calls me Bunchy, but it's generally Rats—and I reckon Rats is good enough."

"All right, Rats. Now I want you to commence at the beginning and tell me all about your interview with Peters, and explain exactly what he said to you, and what he told you to tell me. Will you do it?"

"I reckon so."

CHAPTER II.

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH.

"Now give me the story," said the detective. "Begin at the moment when Peters first addressed you, and tell me all that happened."

"That's dead easy."

"All right. Let me hear it."

"I was standing there just where you first saw me, talking to them fellers, when I spies Peters all of a sudden. He seemed to drop out of the clouds, he came up so sudden. I reckon he must ha' stepped out of a door somewheres around."

"Doubtless."

"He crooked his finger, like that, and I went up to him to hear what he had to say. I had heard that he had been pinched, and I was surprised to see him, and I figgered it out that he was broke and wanted a stake; but I was fixed for a touch all right, and wasn't kickin' any. He struck me as a chap who is on the level, when I knew him.

"'What's doin'?' says I.

"'I want you to do something for me, Rats,' he says.

"'How much?' says I; and he laughed.

"'Oh, I'm fixed all right,' he told me. 'I'm not looking for a stake, but I want you to do something for me—if you've got the sand.'

"I allowed that I had the sand, and he went on:

"'Do you know Nick Carter, the fly cop?' he asked me; and when I said I didn't, he told me the tale about your chasing him over the roofs, and all that. He made it interesting, too. At the end of it he says: 'That ain't the only thing that Carter has done to me, neither. He has done a lot, and I'm going to get hunk if it takes a leg. I want you to carry a message to him to that effect.'

"'That strikes me as a fool proposition,' I told him. 'If you're looking for his scalp, what's tha use'n sending him warning? Why not creep up behind him and "do" him when he ain't looking? That would be my way.'

"'You ain't doing this, Rats,' says he. 'I'm a-doin' it. Now, have you got the sand to go to Nick Carter's house for me, and carry the message I will give you, or are you afraid of him to that extent that you'll flunk?'

"'I ain't never seen the man yet that I'm afraid of,' I told him, 'and I don't expect that you can send me to none; leastwise not to that one. What do you want me to tell him?'

"'Jest tell him that Peters sent you—and look out for squalls when you say it, for he don't like me none.'

"'That don't cut no ice,' I told him. 'Go on with your yarn.'

"'Well,' says he, 'tell him that Peters sent you; tell him that Peters has got out, almost as soon as he got in; and tell him that I've got blood in my eye and that it's all for him. Just say that I'm going to get him and that it'll be quick and sudden. Tell him there won't be any

quarter asked or given, and that it spells death with a large D.' Them's his words."

"Go on. What more?"

"'Tell him,' says Peters, 'that I've got a friend 'r two who are bound to help me, and make him understand that he'll regret the day he ever monkeyed with me, or went down to old Mulvaney's place and broke it up.'

"Well, mister, we had got about that far—there might ha' been a little more or a little less said—when of a sudden Peters grabbed me by the arm and near pinches it off, and he says in me ear:

"'Rats, there he comes now. That's him. You won't have to go to his house with the message. Just step right out in front of him and deliver it, and I'll git where I can look on and see the effect. But mind that you don't tell him any more than is necessary about me. He'll ask a lot uh questions, for he's a lulu at that, but you needn't go for giving the hull shebang away; and that's all, mister."

"You don't know where he went, so that he could look on, do you?"

"I don't, and that's the truth; but if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"But the probability is that he is watching us at this very moment, isn't it?"

"I reckon it is, if he meant what he said."

"You didn't see which house he entered?"

"No; and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

"You ought to be a detective instead of a crook, Rats."

"Mebby so; but I ain't; see?"

"Wouldn't you like to be?"

"Not on your life."

"Peters is no pal of yours, is he?"

"No; and he ain't likely to be. All the same I ain't giving no man away. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather be a crook than what you are."

"*Are* you a crook?"

"I reckon I am. That's me. I ain't proud of it—but I ain't ashamed of it, either. I never had no training in anything else. I left Montana because they objected out there to my taking things that didn't belong to me—and that ain't a healthy country to live in and do that sort uh thing."

"You have been in prison?"

"More'n once. But what uh that? I ain't no friend uh your'n, and you may as well know it. It is mor'n likely that if Peters should ask me to, I'd side with him in what's coming, and be after your gore, same as he is."

The detective smiled.

"You are rather a brave young man to dare to tell me such a thing to my face, Rats," he said.

"Why shouldn't I tell you, if I think it. There ain't nothin' on the books now for which you can run me in. I've heard at lot about you, but I ain't afraid of you, for all that—and I'm dead agin' you on principle, for I ain't got no use for constables, and sheriffs and police and coppers, and spies—no ma'am. I don't say that I could lick you, in a square fight, but you can put your money on it that if it ever does come to a scrap between us, I ain't goin' to do no running."

He did not look as if he would, either.

"I'm about as quick with a gun as they made 'em out there in Montana, where I lived for a while. At least that's the reputation I had," he went on, after a moment. "If the time ever comes, Nick Carter, when you want to take me in, keep your eyes peeled while you're a-doing it, or you won't git me. I guess that'll be about all for this interview."

He turned on his heel and would have left the detective to rejoin his friends, had not Nick caught him by the sleeve of his coat and held him.

"Wait, Rats," he said, holding tightly to the coat.

"Well, what for?" asked Rats, with a snarl, and he half-turned to face the detective again.

"I'm not through with you yet."

"Mebby not; but I'm through with you. Let go my sleeve."

"In a moment."

"Let go now!"

"Not just yet, Rats."

"Let go, hang you! If you don't, I'll——"

He made a motion with his other hand as if to reach into one of his pockets, but he was suddenly jerked off his feet, wheeled around and handcuffs were slipped over his wrists behind his back before he could do a thing to prevent it.

It was wonderful, the change that came over him the instant he felt the pressure of the steel against his wrists and realized that he was caught.

The bluff and bravado all went out of him on the instant, and in their place there came to the surface all the cunning of the animal for which he had been named.

The daredevil air that he had assumed before gave place now to a whining, supplicating manner, and he attempted to turn again to face the detective.

But Nick held him where he had him, laughing quietly at the utter discomfiture of the young tough.

"What have you pinuched me for?" he demanded, presently, in a whining tone.

"For being sassy, Rats. You've got too much gab in your make-up. That sort of bluff won't go here, and the sooner you find it out, the better."

"There ain't nothing you can take me in for," he protested.

"Oh, yes there is. Lots of things."

"What, then?"

"Well, being a suspicious character will do, for one. I can get you thirty days on that, by your own confessions that you have made to me since we have been talking here."

For an instant, then, the bluff of the young tough returned to him. He began to bluster, and exclaimed:

"Look here, Nick Carter, I want to tell you one thing—and then some!"

"Well, what is it?"

"If you don't let me go, you'll have two agin' you, instead uh one. I'll take turns with Peters, so help me, if you don't——"

The detective squeezed the arm he held in his grasp until Rats exclaimed aloud with pain and rage, and so shut off his further threats; and then he called out to a policeman who at that moment turned a corner and came into view.

"I want you to take this fellow to the station-house," he said to the officer, as soon as he came up. "Tell the lieutenant on duty at the desk that Nick Carter sent him there, and that I will appear later to make the charge. In the meantime he is to lock him up on the charge of disorderly conduct. Have him thoroughly searched, and lay aside everything you take from him until I get there and inspect it. Now, Rats, answer me."

"Answer you what?" demanded Rats sulkily.

"Do you want me to go easy with you—or shall I push you hard?"

"I want you to go easy, uh course."

"Then tell me which house Peters entered when he left you."

"I don't know."

"You are lying now."

"You're another."

"Take him along, officer."

As the officer turned away with his charge, several of the young toughs with whom Rats had been talking before his conversation with the detective pressed forward as if they would interfere, but Nick quickly stepped in front of them, and said cooly:

"Any one of you who happens to be anxious to go along with Rats has only to say so. He will be accommodated."

They paused irresolutely, and Nick signaled out one of them who looked tougher than the others.

"*You*," he said, "Come here to me. What is *your* name?"

"Spike Coogan."

"Did you see a man who was talking to Rats just before I came up?" asked the detective.

"Yes."

"Did you know him?"

"No."

"And you don't know me, do you?"

"No."

"When that man left Rats, which house did he go into? Tell me, unless you wish to go along with Rats, with a pair of handcuffs on your wrists. Which house?"

"That one," was the quick reply; and Spike Coogan pointed with his finger.

Instantly the detective started forward, and as he did so a pistol shot rang out spitefully from a window on the second floor.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS SHEET OF PAPER.

The bullet, evidently aimed at the detective, sped so near his ear that he could feel the wind of it, and a second one that followed it lifted his hat from his head as he dashed forward toward the door of the house from which the shots were fired.

There was no time to fire a third before Nick was out of range, close to the wall of the house; and he dashed through the doorway and up the narrow stairs that confronted him, with the sound of a laugh in the voice of Peters ringing in his ears; for he recognized the voice the instant he heard it.

He guessed from what room the shots had proceeded and he ran toward it as quickly as possible, but only to find, when he arrived there, an empty apartment, bare even of furniture, but with the litter of recent occupancy about it, as if the people who had formerly occupied the place had just moved out.

But Peters was not there, although two empty cartridge-shells on the floor testified to his recent presence, and also to the fact that he had been cool enough to pause to extract the empty shells and reload his pistol before he left the room.

This of itself spoke volumes to the detective, for it assured him that the man had been thoroughly aware, before he fired the shots, how he would escape from the place when the moment came for him to do so.

Nor was there any trace of him, other than the empty shells.

The detective knew, however, that he had not gone down the stairs, and he remembered that one of Peters' favorite methods of escaping from a place was to make for the roof.

The house was a regular tenement, with four apartments to a floor, each one consisting of two rooms and a closetlike place which was doubtless classed as a third room when the places were let.

Nick dashed into each of the remaining three tenements before he made for the roof; but it was only to discover that the entire floor was untenanted, just as the first tenement had been; and it required only a glance to assure him that Peters was not in any of them.

He made for the roof then, believing that Peters had gone that way; but when he reached it after climbing four more flights of steep stairs, there was nothing there to reward him, and the house stood so high above its neigh-

bors that there was no possibility that Peters had flown across the roofs.

Nick searched the house then thoroughly, from top to bottom, but although he looked in every nook and cranny where the man might have concealed himself, he found no trace of the malignant crook.

He had succeeded in making good his escape, that was certain.

The house was of the modern kind. It was not provided with secret panels for escaping, and so after satisfying himself that his man was certainly not inside the house, the detective went again to the roof and began a second examination there.

He was more thorough this time, and ere long he discovered a mark upon the inside of the coping along one side of the roof where something had been fastened to it. Against the edge of the stone above it there were bits of fibre, showing where a rope had scraped against the sharp edge; and here, he saw, was Peters' place of escape.

The man had already placed the rope there, to use in case he was forced to leave suddenly; and the moment that Nick had dashed into the house, Peters had made for the roof, had let himself down to the adjoining one, and thence through the scuttle of that house to the street.

He had doubtless arranged some device by which he was enabled to pull the rope down after him; and so he was gone, and had been gone at least fifteen minutes before the detective discovered his method of departure.

Nick returned to the street and entered the adjoining house; and there he met a small child—a little girl, who was playing in the hallway. He stopped.

"Well, little one," he said, "are you having a good time?"

"Yep," she replied, very much to the point.

"Were you playing here when the man came running down the stairs a few moments ago?"

"Yep. He almost runned over me, he did."

"What did he say?"

"He swore at me, he did."

"Was he a tall man, clean shaven, like I am? Did he have black eyes?"

"Yep. Bad eyes, they were; just like he was mad about something."

"Did you see which way he turned when he went out of the house?"

"Yep. He turned that ways;" and she pointed along the street to indicate what she meant. "He stopped in the door a minute and looked out; then he laughed, just like he was pleased about something, and then he went away and I didn't see him no more."

"Thank you, little one. Here are some pennies for you;" and the detective turned away.

"Dan Peters had a close call that time," he mused, as he went again upon the street. "I don't think I will wait to give him the opportunity to carry out his threat. Instead of that I will carry the war into Africa. I will go for him right now, red-hot, and without waiting for him to show his hand."

Even in that moment of communion with himself, the detective had formed a plan, and he proceeded now to carry it out without delay.

It was yet early in the afternoon, and he hastened at once to the police station to which he had sent Rats—and found him there.

"We searched him, according to your wishes," explained the lieutenant in charge of the station. "There are the things we found on him, over there."

Nick approached the pile, and found a miscellaneous collection of articles.

There was a dangerous knife, two pistols of five shots each, a bunch of skeleton keys, a pair of burglar's forceps, for turning keys from the outside of doors, a hundred and fifty dollars in money, and some change besides; and there was also a sheet of note-paper with some curious tracings upon it—tracings which denoted that it was a plan of something, and Nick's first thought was that it was of a cache where the young thief had hidden away his ill-gotten gains.

But the more he studied it, the less he thought that, and finally he folded it and put it in his pocket, telling the officer who was with him to preserve the other stuff for future reference, but that he would take charge of that himself.

Then he asked that Rats be delivered over to him.

"I will return his money," he told the lieutenant, "but you may keep the other things here. I want to take the man away with me. I'll make it right down at headquarters; and if one of you will get a closed hack for me, I'll be much obliged."

Less than half an hour later, with Rats beside him, the detective was driven away from the station-house toward his own home, where in due time he arrived.

But on the way there he did some questioning.

"Rats," he said, "aren't you sorry that you played that bluff game with me to-day?"

"Yes, I am; and you'll be sorry, too, before you forget about it. You hear me."

"Perhaps; but you'll probably be sorrier. Now, Rats, do you feel in a talkative mood?"

"Huh! That depends on what you want to talk about."

"Several things."

"What are they?"

"Do you want your money back again? I've got it in my pocket for you."

"Then hand it over, you."

"Not so fast. There are conditions. There was another thing that I guess you want, too."

"Mebby so."

"That sheet of paper, eh?"

Rats gave a gasp and attempted to feel in his pockets, but the handcuffs on his wrists prevented that; then he sat stupidly staring at the detective, until the latter remarked, in a quiet tone:

"Perhaps you didn't know that they found the sheet of paper when they searched you; eh?"

"No; I didn't."

"I have got that here with me, also."

"Give it to me! Give it to me, will you?"

"That depends, Rats."

"On what? I'll do anything if you will give that paper back to me."

"That is a big promise, Rats."

"I don't care if it is."

"Will you tell me all you know about Peters?"

"Sure, I'll tell you that, but it ain't anything at all. I made a bluff to-day that I knew a lot about him, but it was all bluff. I don't know anything about him at all, only what I already told you."

"I guessed that. But you do know where he hangs out. You made some sort of an appointment with him to meet him later, didn't you?"

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't."

"Tell me, if you want your money—and the sheet of paper."

"Well, then, I did."

"Where was it?"

"He was to let me know later. Honest Injun that's all I know about it. He was to send me word with directions."

"How was he to send you word?"

"By a boy he calls Tufts."

"Where was he to send it?"

"To Riordan's saloon—on the corner near where you found me."

"When?"

"To-night."

"At what time?"

"Between eleven and midnight."

"Is that straight?"

"Yes."

Nick gave Rats his money and then slowly took the sheet of paper from his pocket, and he noticed that Rats' eyes lingered greedily upon it all the time he held it in his hand.

"What is this, Rats?" he asked in a low tone.

"I won't tell you that, nohow."

"It's a hide-away for some of your swag, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is."

"How much have you got there?"

"Find out, if you can."

"Here, take my pencil and write the numbers 1, 2, 7 and 9 on the back of this envelope. If you'll do that, and one or two other things, I'll give you the paper."

Rats wrote the figures eagerly and gave them to the detective, who merely glanced at them and put them into his pocket. Then he turned the paper over to Rats and watched him while he folded it carefully.

"Rats," he said, "you can keep that paper, and I won't ask you for it again, provided you will go with me quietly where I mean to take you anyhow, and if you will do exactly as I ask you to do, when we get there. If you do not promise. I shall take the paper away from you again and destroy it. What do you say?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to do just as I tell you. Will you keep the paper, or shall I take it from you again?"

"I'll keep it, that's what I'll do. Now, what?"

"I'll tell you that after a little while," replied the detective, and they drove onward in silence after that.

CHAPTER IV.

RATS, A SLY YOUNG TOUGH.

When Nick led Rats into the house he encountered Patsy in the hallway.

The latter was just on the point of going out, and announced that Chick had already gone; but the detective replied to him:

"It doesn't matter about Chick at present. You are the one I want, Patsy. Take this chap and lock him in the strong room at the top of the house. When you have done that, come to me in the study."

It was not long before Patsy reappeared in the detective's study, and dropped into a chair toward which the detective motioned.

At last, when the latter raised his eyes from some writing he had been engaged upon, Patsy asked him:

"Who's the lad?"

"He is called Rats," replied the detective.

"Well, the name fits him all right. He's a sassy little cuss, too. He offered to scrap with me if I'd take the irons off him. What's up, chief?"

"Peters has broken out, Patsy."

"Peters! You don't mean it! How did he get out?"

"I don't know—yet. And besides, it doesn't make any difference to us *how* he got out, so long as it is certain he is out."

"Peters is a bad one."

"He is that. And he has sworn revenge upon you and Chick and me."

"He isn't the first one."

"No. But you and I both know that Peters will do his utmost to carry out any threat he makes."

"I guess that is no dream."

"I almost ran into him to-day. He was giving Rats a message to bring to me when he saw me approaching where they were standing. Rats was sassy and I clapped

the irons on him just to teach him a lesson, although immediately after I had done it, I thought I saw a good plan in keeping him for a time. I'll tell you about what that was presently."

"All right."

"I called an officer and sent Rats to the station-house where I had him searched."

"Find anything?"

"I'm coming to that. We found the usual assortment of things on him; but among them was the original of this scrap of paper;" and the detective took from one of his pockets an exact copy of the paper that Rats had been so eager to repossess himself of.

Patsy took it and studied it carefully.

"It looks like one of those plans you see in books, about how to find a lost mine, or a buried treasure, or something of that sort."

"Exactly; and that is what I thought it was, at first; only I have changed my mind since then."

"I should guess," said Patsy, in a meditative way, "if I was asked to do so, that it is the plan of a place where Rats, as you call him, has concealed some of his swag."

"I thought so, too; but it isn't that."

"No? Then what is it?"

"That plan was not drawn out by Rats himself. It was made by another person and given to him. You see, don't you, that the figures 1, 2, 7 and 9, appear in the plan?"

"Yes."

"I had Rats make those figures with a pencil there on the spot, and so I know that he did *not* make the ones that are in the plan."

"Well, then, who did?"

"Very probably Peters made them."

"Oh! I see. At least, I begin to think I do. But tell me what you make of the paper, anyway?"

"The message that Peters sent to me through Rats was to the effect—if I take it literally and then read between the lines—that he had organized or had begun the organization of another gang of crooks, something on the plan of the Criminal Trust, only on a much less extensive scale."

"Uh-huh," said Patsy.

"I think this paper means," continued the detective, "that Peters has recognized in Rats a person who would be an acquisition to his organization, and has asked him to join it."

"Well?"

"And that this paper, or rather the original of it, was to tell him how to find the place where they meet."

"Good!" exclaimed Patsy. "If that is so——"

"It is evident," interrupted the detective, "that something goes with this paper, if I am right in what the paper itself represents. There should be more to it. The paper alone cannot take me to the place of meeting—but, I found out one thing more."

"What was that?"

"Between eleven and twelve o'clock to-night Peters is to send a young fellow named Tufts to Riordan's saloon to meet Rats and now if we can discover what that meeting is for, I believe that through that and with the aid of this paper, we can find the place of meeting. I don't care much about Peters' threats; I care still less about the organization he is forming; but I do care about having him roaming about the city at liberty when he ought to be in the Tombs."

"And it would be a good idea to get him in limbo again before he has a chance to carry out any of his threats—don't you think so?"

"Yes."

"And you've already got a plan, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to tell me what it is?"

"I think, Patsy," replied the detective, speaking slowly, "that I will make another Rats out of you."

"Do you mean that you will fix me out in imitation of Rats? Is that the idea?"

"That is it, exactly. And Patsy, he will be an easy mark for you to imitate. He has a very peculiar way of talking. He mixes up the Southern drawl with a touch of the Western twang and he slips in nautical terms in the most unexpected places. I will give you a chance to go up and study him, presently."

"All right."

"In the meantime I will have another talk with him myself; but I don't think he can be induced to give anything away. He is most conscientious about that—if it can be said to proceed from conscience."

"I should hardly call it that. I suppose you will want me to keep that engagement for him, with the fellow Tufts, eh?"

"Yes."

"And at the same time you will be hanging around the saloon to see what happens, and to follow us if we go out together? Is that the idea?"

"That is it."

"All right. I'm game for the attempt. Only we must not forget that we have got a tough proposition to fool, when we are up against Peters. And not only that, he is wise to our—or rather to your game—of making up to represent others."

"I know."

Nick left Patsy then and went to the room where Rats was confined—and as the latter had already been served with a good, square meal and with cigarettes—for he had demanded them at the outset—he was in a particularly good humor.

"Well, Rats," said the detective as he entered and care-

fully closed the door after him, "how do you like it here?"

"Out uh sight, mister," was the quick reply.

"It's all right to be the guest of Nick Carter, don't you think so?"

"I shorely do—and then some more."

"What about that appointment you have with Tufts tonight, Rats?"

"I've been thinking about that, mister."

"What have you thought about it?"

"I was wondering if you were going to let me go in time to keep it; hey?"

"Not on your life, Rats."

"Hey?"

"I'm not going to let you go in time to keep any engagement with Tufts; you can bank on that."

"But what will Pe—Tufts think about it, if I ain't there to meet up with him?"

"I don't imagine that *Tufts* will think about it at all. It will be Peters who will be disappointed, not Tufts. But you see, I have brought you here purposely to keep you out of contact with Peters."

"Well, if I can't go, I can't, and that's all about it. Tufts—and Peters, too, will have to wait, I reckon."

"Suppose I should go to meet Tufts for you, in your place? How would that strike you?" asked the detective.

"I think I see you doing that, mister."

"Or suppose I send somebody, eh; somebody whom they will think is Rats? How would that work?"

"It wouldn't work at all."

"No? Why not?"

"Jest because it wouldn't. You ain't onto the password."

"Oh, there was a password, was there?"

"Sure, Mike."

"Perhaps I could induce you to tell me what it is?"

"I ain't seeing it that way, mister. When I give up anything you let me know. That ain't the kind of stuff I'm made of, it ain't."

"What was Tufts to meet you for, Rats?"

"He was to bring me a message from Peters; I told you that."

"And take back another message from you to Peters, wasn't he?"

"Sure thing."

"And then—what then?"

"Nothing then."

"Weren't you to go to the place you had agreed to, after you had seen Tufts?"

"Maybe so."

"And wasn't that paper to tell you how to find the place after Tufts had given you the necessary key to it?"

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!" laughed Rats. "We think we're smart, don't we? Some! Well, I guess! Say, Nick Carter, I ain't nobody's fool, I ain't! I wasn't borned yesterday, I wasn't."

"I think I will have to ask you to give me that paper again," said the detective, making a step forward as if he intended to take it; but Rats only laughed boldly in his face, and without moving, he replied:

"I thought that would be about what you'd be up to, and—well, you can have it, if you can find it. I chewed it up to a pulp, I did; and swallowed it, I did. You won't find any paper on me now. I've got a good memory, and I learned what was in that paper. Learned it by heart, so I wouldn't have to keep the paper that you were fool enough to give back to me."

"Perhaps I learned it by heart, too, before I returned it to you," suggested the detective. "What would you say to that, Rats?"

"I'd say you was a liar," replied the young tough boldly.

CHAPTER V.

PATSY AS A LIVING PICTURE.

But the detective had succeeded in obtaining an admission from Rats which was exactly what he wished to discover; namely, that the paper in question was what he had believed it to be; a means whereby Rats was to discover the meeting-place of the organization he had been requested to join.

He already knew, from his conversation with Rats earlier in the day, that there was no acquaintance between him and Tufts, and he was therefore hopeful that he could succeed in making Patsy so like Rats that he could deceive Peters himself.

The detective smiled quizzically at his prisoner. Then, pointing toward a window of the room, he said:

"Stand over there for a moment, Rats."

"What for?" demanded the young crook.

"I'll show you something interesting, if you will do as I say," continued the detective, taking a pad and a pencil from his pockets, and preparing himself to make a drawing.

He began to work rapidly with his pencil even while the young man remained undecided whether to accede to the detective's request or not; and Rats stepped forward and tried to see what Nick was doing.

But the detective placed one hand over the drawing he was making.

"Not yet," he said. "Do as I say, and I'll show you later."

"What are you going to do? Draw my picture?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I don't want it drawn. What's it for, anyhow?"

"It's not for the Rogue's gallery. I'll promise you that."

"I didn't ask you what it wasn't for. I asked you what it *was* for."

"It is for my own use."

"So's you'll remember me next time you see me, I suppose?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I don't want my picture took. I object to it."

"Stand over there as I tell you and I will give you—let me see, what shall I give you?"

"Make it a ten-spot, and I'll go you."

"I'll do better than that. I'll make it a new suit of clothes that is worth thirty dollars."

"On the level?"

"Yes."

"You're on, mister." He crossed to the window and took up a characteristic pose. If the detective had placed him in position, he could not have done it better, and the consequence was that the pencil flew rapidly over the paper so that the sketch the detective was making was quickly finished.

"Let me see it," demanded Rats, as the detective left his chair and crossed the room toward the door.

"Wait a little," replied Nick.

He left the room, but returned after a moment with one of Patsy's suits of clothing, and throwing this upon a chair, he said:

"There, Rats, try those on. That is a fine suit of clothes. See how they will fit you."

"Gee! They're all right, all right."

"Certainly they are."

"Try them on and see how they'll fit you."

"Well, it won't take me long to do that. Here goes."

He fell to at once and in much less time than it takes to tell it, he had thrown aside his own garments and was busily engaged in arraying himself in those that the detective had brought to him.

So busily was he engaged that he did not see the detective when he picked up the discarded suit and, throwing it across one arm, quietly left the room, closing and locking the door after him.

It was not until he was thoroughly dressed and was looking at himself in the glass that he made the discovery that he was alone—and he remembered then that he had not taken his personal belongings from the pockets of his old clothes, either.

He noticed, too, that his collar and the flashy tie he had worn, were gone as well, and he had begun to swear roundly about it when the door opened and Nick Carter entered the room again.

"What the devil did you do with my old clothes?" Rats demanded hotly.

"You won't want them again, Rats; at least, not right away," replied the detective. "See, here is a new tie to go with a nice clean collar of the latest shape. And now if you'll be real good, I'll return presently and show you the picture—life size."

"Oh, hang the picture. I had forgotten that. What have you done with all the stuff that was in my pockets. There was my money——"

"Here it is. You are welcome to it."

"And the other things? What about them?"

"Oh, I didn't bring the other things. You shall have them later."

Suddenly Rats burst into a fit of immoderate laughter.

"I know what you're up to," he exclaimed after a moment. "You didn't believe me when I said that I had chewed up that paper. You thought I was joshing, and you got up that scheme so's you could search my clothes. Much good it'll do you. There ain't no paper. I destroyed it."

But the detective did not wait to hear all this.

Before Rats had ceased speaking Nick was out of the room again, and at once he returned to Patsy, where together they set about making the disguise in which the assistant was to appear that night.

With the drawing that Nick had made, and assisted by the clothes discarded by Rats, the task was not difficult; and when we take into consideration the skill of the detective at this particular art, we can imagine how thoroughly he performed it.

After half an hour of steady work, Patsy's originality had entirely disappeared and he stood forth as perfect a reproduction of the "Rats" that Nick had met downtown on the street, as can be imagined.

The detective stood off at a little distance from him, studying the effect of his work critically; and at last he said:

"You'll do. You'll do perfectly."

"Do you think it is a good copy?" asked Patsy.

"It is perfect; as near perfect as it could be done. Now, come along up-stairs with me and we will show Rats a living picture of himself. It shall be your opportunity of studying his mannerisms and language."

"Has he caught on to what we are up to?"

"No; not yet; but he will now, when he sees you."

"Think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Come along. The sight of you now will loosen his tongue and make him talk. There couldn't be a better opportunity for you to study him. Come."

They ascended the stairs together, but Nick entered the room alone, leaving Patsy just outside the door.

"Rats," he asked, when he entered, "would you like to see that picture I promised to show you—life size?"

"Sure thing, mister."

"You have changed so since I made it that it doesn't look much as you do now."

"I'm dressed up some, eh? And then some more! Well, I reckon. I've got a full new set uh sails on, for this voyage. Say, I like good clothes, I do."

"So I see."

"Trot on your picture, then, if you've got one."

"All right," replied the detective.

He was standing near the door, and now he opened it, and exclaimed:

"Come in, Patsy."

Patsy entered the room and as he did so, Rats stared. Then his jaw dropped. Then he muttered something under his breath, and after hesitating a second, he crossed the room quickly and stood before the mirror. Then he turned again and confronted Patsy.

"*Yes*, ma'am!" he exclaimed then. "That's me, and this is—who the devil *am* I, anyhow? Say, mister, which one is which and which is the other? You've got me played to a standstill. I'm plumb froze out, I am. I lay down my hand. I can't see the raise and I draw out. Yes, ma'am."

Then suddenly he took a step nearer to Patsy, and shaking his fist in the young detective's face, he exclaimed:

"Who the blazes are you, anyhow?"

"I'm the picture, I reckon," replied Patsy, repressing a laugh, and imitating the voice of Rats so perfectly that that young tough was startled anew. He turned to Nick.

"What's the ante, anyhow?" he demanded. "If this is a table-stake game, I'm out, that's what! What is this, anyhow? A dummy? Are you springin' a wax figger onto me, mister?"

"No," replied Nick, laughing in spite of his effort not to do so. "That is not wax. It is blood and bone."

"He's certainly is me long lost brother. He's a sure 'nuff ringer for yours truly, if anybody should inquire. What's its name, mister?"

"Rats," replied Patsy, before Nick could answer.

"Eh? Rats? No, it ain't. None uh that. *My* name is Rats."

"You lost that name along with your clothes."

"But what's the game? *Oh!* I see, now! I'm on. You're going to keep the appointment with Tufts for me, are you? Well, that ain't bad, mister. But it wasn't necessary, for Tufts don't know me from a side of sole leather, anyhow; and you ain't got the password to tell him, so's he'll think it's me."

"You will give that to us," said Nick reassuringly.

"Will I? Not much, mister."

"Patsy will persuade Tufts to take him to Peters, just the same."

"Ho, ho! So this chap who looks like me is Patsy, is it? I've heard about you, I have, and I'd like to have just one good pass at you—like that!"

He struck out with his fist, even as he spoke. A savage blow it was, too, and if it had landed, must have done considerable damage.

But Patsy had been alert for something of the kind from the beginning and therefore was not taken off his guard.

He caught the blow as it fell, and with the same motion seized Rats by the wrist, whirling him forward and around so that he spun across the room and brought up solidly against the wall, cracking his head against it so that he stood for a moment dazed and uncertain.

And while he remained in that position, trying to think what to say next, Nick Carter and Patsy quietly slipped out of the room and down the stairs, leaving him alone to think out the answer to his own conundrums.

"It is time for you to be starting, Patsy," said the detective, as soon as they were together in the study again.

"But I haven't got the password."

"You will have to do the best you can without it. I doubt if there is any at all. Here is a copy of that paper I have made for you. You must use your own judgment about it. If there should be occasion for you to make use of it, you will know it when the time comes."

"And what about you, chief? Where will you be all this time?"

"I won't be far off; you may rely upon that."

"Will you follow me to Riordan's?"

"Yes. That is my intention."

CHAPTER VI.

PATSY BEGINS TO PLAY THE GAME.

When Nick Carter fixed himself to follow Patsy to Riordan's saloon he adopted no further disguise than that of an ordinary tough, and he knew that he could carry off the part so perfectly that there would be very little chance of detection.

He knew something about Riordan's place, too.

It was like many thousands of others in the great city of New York, and bore no particular reputation save that it was known as a "tough" place, and acknowledged to be a resort for that class.

It was a likely place for Peters to have selected for the appointment with Rats, for it was in a tough neighborhood of the city, and was known far and near as a meeting-place for all the classes that prey.

Nick believed that Patsy, in his disguise as Rats, would perfectly carry off the part that had been assigned to him, and he relied upon the sagacity of his young assistant to fool the young crook called Tufts, who was to meet him there.

But the detective very much desired to witness that meeting.

He wished to be there so that he could follow the two young men after they had become acquainted, and in order that, if anything should happen to betray Patsy's identity to his enemies, he would himself be present to observe and to act, if action should become necessary.

It was therefore very soon after Patsy's departure, disguised as Rats, that the detective went out himself; and he took his way straight to Riordan's, hoping that he would arrive there before Patsy did.

In this he was successful.

He had been inside the place as much as fifteen minutes when the door opened and Patsy entered—Patsy in his character of Rats, which has already been proclaimed to be a living picture of the young and versatile crook.

One thing happened at once upon which neither of them had counted; and that was the hail of recognition which greeted the supposed Rats the moment he entered the place.

Both had forgotten to consider how well such a character as Rats must be known all along the East Side of the city.

And this was demonstrated the instant that Patsy passed through the door.

A group of toughs, in appearance much the same as he was, who were gathered along the bar, at once set up a shout of recognition.

Several of them stepped forward and seemed eager to be on familiar terms with the young crook, and Nick looked on with some misgivings as to how Patsy would carry off the scene.

But he need not have troubled himself about it at all, for Patsy was quite equal to the occasion.

He had already studied Rats closely enough to know that he was not of the enthusiastic sort, and that he rather looked down upon his daily associates as inferior to him. And Patsy determined to adopt this manner with any person who spoke to him.

"Hello, there, Rats!" was the first greeting he received; and a pockmarked young tough grasped him by the hand as cordially as if the two had not met in a long time.

"Hello yourself!" rejoined Patsy nonchalently. "I'm treatin'. Say what you'll all have, fellers."

They were not slow to accept this invitation, and while the drinks were being served, the one who had spoken first continued:

"Say, Rats, what happened to you yesterday? When I saw the cops taking you away, I says to meself that it's all up with Ratsy. What was doin'? Eh?"

"Nothin' was doing."

"But they didn't take you to the station-house for nothing, did they?"

"No. They was tryin' to make me give a friend uh mine the double-cross. But not any in mine, is what I says to them; and they lets up."

"Who'd they want you to peach on?"

"Oh, a friend uh mine. You might ha' seen me chinnin' with him just afore it all happened. And say, did you know who the duffer was who carted me off?"

"I didn't know at the time; but I've heard since."

"It was Nick Carter."

"Uh-huh! I'm glad it was you instead uh me. I don't want any uh Nick Carter in mine."

"Huh!" exclaimed Patsy, with fine disgust. "He ain't no more'n a man, I reckon. He's only a fly cop, when

all's said. I told him what I thought uh him, in short order."

"You did? Well, you always did have gall, Rats."

"That was the reason he took me in."

"What was? On account of your gall, hey?"

"No; because I sassed him. He didn't like it, nohow. I told him to go and chase himself, and then he gripped me afore I had any show at all, and he had the nippers on me good and plenty."

"Yes. I saw that."

"If I'd had half a chance there wouldn't be any Nick Carter in this town, by now. I was reachin' for me gun when he grabbed me."

"How'd he happen to turn you loose again so soon?"

"There ain't nothin' ag'in me anywhere, is there? The cops ain't got no record uh mine to stack me up against. That's why."

"So he let you go, eh?"

"He had tuh."

"I don't see how?"

"Well"—and this was said with a fine air of bluster—"I just up and told him that I wouldn't stand for no such layout as he was givin' me. I says to him, says I: 'If you don't let up on me, Carter, I swear I'll do you the minute I gets a chance.' He laughed a little at that, but he saw that I meant it, all the same; and the result was that he set me free as soon as he had given me a lot uh guff, and found out that I wouldn't peach on nobody."

"You bluffed Nick Carter, did you?"

"Betcher life I bluffed him. He ain't no more than anybody else, he ain't, and don't you go for to forgit it, neither. When anybody is up against Rats, there's bound to be something doing, and that Carter feller was wise enough to see it."

The lot that were gathered around the two, listening with eagerness to what Rats was saying, looked upon him now as nothing less than a hero, and they gave expression to the admiration they felt in various ways. Presently the first speaker said:

"Say, Rats, do you know a feller named Tufts?"

"No, I don't. Why?"

"He was around here looking for you an hour ago."

"An hour ago! Well, he can come again, then. The appointment wasn't till after 'leven."

"I thought you said you didn't know him."

"So I did."

"But now you say that you had an appointment with him."

"Well, that's right, too."

"How the blazes——"

"Say, you're askin' too many questions."

"Well, he was here, anyhow."

"Did he say he was coming back again?"

"Yes."

"That'll do, then. What kind of a looking feller is he?"

"Oh, he's a peacherina. A sort of a dude. Looks as if his mamma had just let him out; but he's got an eye in his head just the same."

"Only one?"

"Aw, g'wan! You know what I mean."

"Well, tell me some more about him."

"He came in here about an hour ago, and he picks me out uh the bunch as a likely one, I guess; and he walks up to me and says, 'I'm lookin' for Rats. Where is he?'

"'None uh your business,' says I.

"'That's all right,' says he, grinning at me like a monkey. 'I'm looking for him. I had an appointment with him, although I think I'm rather early. I'm Tufts.'

"'It don't cut no ice with me who you are,' I tells him. 'If Rats had an appointment with you, he'll keep it. You kin bank on that.'

"'I heard that he got took in,' says Tufts.

"'That won't make no difference, either,' says I. 'If he made an appointment with you, he'll keep it, even if he has to fly out uh one of the windows of the Temple to do it.'

"Well, at that he grinned again. He seemed to think it was funny. When he was turning away I says to him:

"'You can bet your boots that if you had an appointment with Rats, he'll be here to keep it on time.'

"'All right,' says he. 'I'll be back;' and with that he goes out, and I ain't seen him since."

"Well, you keep an eye out for him. If you see him come into the place, put me wise."

"Betcher life I will."

"Then I'll call his game and see what he's got to offer."

"All right. I'll watch out. Say, Rats!"

"What?"

"You know me. You know that Smudge is all right, no matter what happens. Put me wise to the lay you're on now, will you?"

"What for? What do you think I am?"

"Well, I had a dream last night. I dreamed that you was gettin' in with some big guys, and going in for cracking a safe or something. If you are——"

"Aw, what's eatin' you?"

"Let me finish."

"Go on, then."

"I want you to take me in with you. I mean that if you're joining a gang, I want to be in it."

Patsy put one finger against his nose and winked solemnly.

"Look here, Smudge," he said slowly. "You know me, or you ought to, anyhow."

"You bet! That's why——"

"Cinch up that tongue uh yours for a holy minute, will you?"

"Yes. Go on."

"If something *is* doing—mind, I don't say there is—but *if* something should be doing, there ain't no gun around this place that I'd as soon have with me as I would you. Now, if you can hang back and look wise, and stand for yours truly every time, there may be a chance a little later to put you up to a kink or two. Are you on?"

"Betcher life I am."

"'Nuff said, then."

"What about the other fellers of our own gang?"

"I ain't saying anything about any uh them—yet. When the time comes to open my trap, I will throw it wide open; you can bank on that. But until the time does come, you can bet your sweet life that Ratsy ain't sayin' a word. See?"

"Yes. Say—look there."

"Where?"

"Over near the door. I didn't see him come in, but that's him now."

"Who? Who do you mean?"

"Why, the duffer as calls himself Tufts. That's him, over there by the door. He's lookin' this way. I guess he thinks it's you, talking with me."

"Go and get him, then, and fetch him here," was the instant order.

CHAPTER VII.

LEARNING THE SECRET RITUAL.

Smudge lost no time in doing as he had been directed, and he crossed the room at once to where the newcomer was standing.

What the conversation was that ensued, Patsy could not hear; but he could see that the two frequently glanced in his direction, and realized that he was the subject of their talk.

But Tufts seemed to be reluctant to approach the supposed Rats, for all that, although he appeared willing enough to be approached; and suddenly it occurred to Patsy that perhaps it was up to him to make the first advance.

He knew nothing of the instructions that Peters had given Rats, although there was no doubt that some sort of a password, or word of recognition had been arranged for use between him and Tufts.

It was evident that Tufts was awaiting that word now.

But how was Patsy to make use of it since he had no knowledge of what it could be?

He was still meditating on the subject when a person whom he had not noticed in the room before brushed roughly past him, and whispered as he did so:

"Go and speak to him, Patsy."

It was Nick Carter, of course, who had delivered the warning, and Patsy at once crossed the room to the place where Smudge and Tufts were still talking together.

He ignored Smudge, entirely, and addressed his remark directly to the new arrival.

"I reckon you was lookin' for me," he said coldly, and fixing a stare, such as Rats might have employed, upon the young man.

"Perhaps I was," came the reply.

"Well, I'm Rats. What have you got to say for yourself? This man here—Smudge is his name, tells me that you was lookin' for me."

"You were expecting me, weren't you?"

"Maybe I was and maybe I wasn't. What of it?"

"Only that I thought you had something to say to me, too."

"Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. Anyhow, if I did you needn't think that I'm going to yell it out before a whole roomful. You're Tufts, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm Rats. Now fire away."

"Perhaps Smudge will excuse us if we step aside for a moment, Rats."

"Perhaps Smudge will; I don't know. I ain't asked him."

But Smudge had already taken the hint and was now out of earshot; and Tufts replied:

"Why don't you give me the password, Rats?"

"What's the use? You know it's me, don't you?"

"Yes; but when I'm told to collect a password, I generally do it."

"Oh, rats! I've forgotten it. I didn't pay no attention when Peters was a givin' it to me, and——"

A bright smile shone upon the handsome, although dissipated face of Tufts.

"That will do very well indeed," he remarked. "You worked it in finely, too. Peters said you'd just mention his name for a password, and I had begun to think you wouldn't do it. I give you my word that I wouldn't have done the rest of the act without it."

"That's all right, too," agreed Patsy. "It was just as well for me to try a minute to see if you would work without it; eh?"

"You're a shrewd one, Rats."

"That's what they've told me wherever I went. Now, what's the game?"

"Have you got the paper that Peters——"

"I've got as good as the paper. I didn't like to carry it around with me so I learned it and then chewed it up. But what's that to you, anyhow?"

"Let me hear if you can describe what the paper says," insinuated Tufts.

"Say! What do you take me for, anyhow? Do you think I'm a chump? I'd be a nice lot to carry secrets around with me, wouldn't I, if I was to give them plumb up to everybody who asked me, same as you have? Come again, Tufts. You're shy a blue chip, you are!"

Tufts smiled approval.

"I begin to think you are all right, Rats," he said patronizingly.

"Betcher life I'm all right."

"Suppose I repeat the paper to you? What do you say to that?"

"You can do as you like about that."

"I'll leave out something here and there which you can supply just to show that you remember it."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Well, to begin with, there was a square marked in red ink, wasn't there?"

"You're doing the talking now."

"Inside the square, at one corner of it was the figure 1. Is that right?"

"I'm listening. It sounds all right, so far, but I ain't saying nothing as yet."

"Well, near another corner, but not exactly in the corner, was the figure 2. How is that?"

"It sounds good. Go on."

"Then over, almost opposite the figure two, but further toward the center of the square, wasn't there a figure 7?"

"There might have been one, as I remember it."

"Then down toward the opposite end of the oblong square, pretty near to the center of it, wasn't there a figure 9?"

"Mebby so."

"And underneath it all there was writing in red ink, eh?"

"That's what you're saying."

"I'm going to begin repeating what that writing in red ink said. I want you to listen."

"I'm a-listenin' with both ears, mister."

"And when I stop, once in the while, as I will do, I want you to say a word or two that is there, so that it goes right on correctly. That will tell me whether you remember the diagram well enough, or not. Are you ready?"

"Sure thing."

"'From the northernmost end, sixteen paces in from the figure one, to a square white stone with'—Go on now, Rats."

"With a figure one on it. How is that?"

"That will do nicely. 'From the northermost end, sixteen paces in, to a square, white stone with the figure one on it. Stand on the square, white stone and say'—What do you say, Rats, when you stand on the square, white stone?"

Patsy looked calmly into the eyes of Tufts, and winked. Then he replied, slowly:

"As I remember it, there was nothin' to say. It was blank."

"Correct. But didn't Peters tell you what to say, right there?"

"I ain't tellin' anybody what Peters said to me, if you should be asked," reported Patsy; for now he was up against just what he had feared. Peters had added some verbal instruction to the diagram on the paper, when he gave it to Rats.

But Tufts seemed to be very deeply pleased by the attitude of the supposed Rats, for he slapped him heartily on the shoulder and said:

"You're all right, my lad! You are! I'll tell Peters

that you're a better one than we believed. Now, what do you say, right there?"

"You can tell me if you want to. I'm not tellin' you, and then some."

"Don't you put your hand to your mouth, so, and shout out, as if you were calling somebody, *'Pete?'*"

"Maybe so. That's about what I'd do, I reckon, if I was caught in a place like that."

"Good boy! Pete stands for Peters, you understand. Now, we will continue."

"You mean that *you* will. I'm not doing this. You are."

"Correct. Now, at the word, Pete, which you shout, somebody replies to you from somewhere, and says, 'What's up?' Is that correct?"

"I reckon it is, mister."

"And what do you reply?"

"Well, if it was me standin' there, I reckon I'd reply that it was none uh his——"

"That will do for that. What do you have to reply, according to instructions?"

"I jest now told you I wasn't saying a word. It's up to you, Tufts."

"You reply, 'Lend me a dollar and seventy-nine cents—make it two,' don't you?"

"I reckon so."

"Look here, Rats, you're almost too careful, when you know so well who I am."

"Maybe so, and maybe not. I don't know who you are, either. You come here and tell me that you came from Peters and you say you're Tufts. I believe you, all right, but I don't *know* it, do I?"

"I suppose not."

"Then what is the use in our arguing about this thing at all? You can go back to Peters, if he sent you, and tell him that I don't want to trust anybody but him till he tells me to do different. You might be Nick Carter, for all I know, and anyhow, I ain't going to run no chances. I'm on the level, I am, and you can bet your pile on that."

"I believe it, Rats."

'Well, you'd better not tell me you don't believe it. It wouldn't be healthy for you around here if you should go for to do such a thing as that."

"I'll go ahead with the ritual myself, without your aid, and so satisfy you that I am all right."

"Just as you please about that."

"In replying as you did, asking for the loan of a 'dollar and seventy-nine cents—make it two,' you used the figures written on the diagram: 1, 2, 7 and 9. Did you notice that?"

"Yes."

"Well, the man replies to you to come inside and find the 2 if you want it; and so you pass through the door that is opened for you. Now here is where I have got to explain it all to you."

"Fire away."

"You don't see the man at all who answered you. He disappears; but when you are through the door, you find another white stone, in the courtyard where you stand, and on that stone is the figure 2. Savvy?"

"Yes."

"The diagram tells you that now you must 'Cross over the roof of 2, pass six-mile stones and stop at the door of 7.' Do you remember that?"

"That's what I'm supposed to do, ain't it?"

"Crossing over the roof of 2 means that you are to walk in the direction indicated by the top part, or roof of the figure. You pass six-mile stones, which means that you pass through six doors in fences that are inside the block, behind the houses."

"Go on."

"At the seventh one you stop. It has a figure 7 painted on it, and you rap against it with your knuckles seven times, *leaning against it while you rap*. Are you on?"

"Yes."

"You hear a voice over your head ask you where you are going, and you reply—what?"

"You are telling it. I ain't. I've said that before."

"You reply, 'I am going to nine.' Now, the diagram says next, 'Eighteen paces to the right—and stop!' It gives you no instruction beyond that, does it?"

"I don't remember any, mister."

"Well, I am here to tell you what to do after you have taken the eighteen paces."

"All right. I'm listening."

CHAPTER VIII.

9 PLUS 1, 10 PLUS 2 AND 12 PLUS 7.

"The eighteen paces," continued Tufts, "take you across a flagged yard in the middle of the block, for that is where you have found yourself. Are you on?"

"Yes."

"And they bring you up against a door built into a

brick wall, but flush with it. You rap on this door once, with your knuckles, wait a minute and rap again, twice. Then you wait, and rap a third time, seven times. Again you wait, and then rap nine times. One, two, seven and nine again, you observe; eh?"

"Yes."

"Now, is your education good enough for you to add together those figures?"

"I reckon so."

"How much do they make?"

"Nineteen."

"Exactly. When the door opens before you, as it will, a voice asks you a question. It says 'What's the ante?' You reply, 'Nineteen.' The voice replies: 'How much does it take to make nineteen?' and you reply—What would you reply, naturally, to such a question?"

"One, two, seven and nine."

"Of course you would, but that isn't the answer. The answer is, 'Nine and one are ten; ten and two are twelve, and twelve and seven are nineteen.' Do you think you can remember all of that?"

"I'd be a fool if I couldn't."

"Well, I'll go over it with you again, if you wish me to do so, for I was sent here to teach it to you; but if you think you've got it down pat there will be no need of that."

"I've got it all right. But tell me what happens after I have said nine and one are ten; ten and two are twelve, and twelve and seven are nineteen?"

"You will be confronted by a woman who looks as though she lives ther. She does, in fact. She is the guard. She's an old hag to look at, but she's all to the good. She will ask you a lot of questions to which you will make no reply whatever. If you say a word in answer to her you will get turned down, even after you have gone that far."

"I'm to keep silent all the time she is talking to me and asking me questions. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"I can do that."

"You are to keep silent until she finally bursts out with the question: 'What's the matter with you? Haven't you got a tongue?' Then you will reply that hers will do for both; and at once, when you say that, she will conduct you to the place of meeting, where you will find the others with whom you are to be associated hereafter. Now, I've got this to say to you, Rats."

"Well?"

"Peters is organizing this society with very great care. He is mighty careful in his selection of members, and you ought to be proud that you are one who has been selected."

"Maybe I am."

"There will only be nineteen members in all, and you are the eighteenth, so there is now only room for one more. Are you on?"

"Betcher."

"Peters is number 1, himself, which means the chief. Number 2 is the second in command."

"And that is you, I suppose?"

"Yes. That is me."

"What's seven?"

"Number 7 is the third in command, and the place is vacant. It is likely that you will be selected for seven, if you keep on pleasing Peters the way you have begun."

"Gee!" said Patsy. "Go on. I'll please him all right, all right."

"Number 9 is to be the fourth in authority, and that place is also vacant, up to the present moment, but both places are to be filled to-night. By 'to-night' I mean before dawn."

"I understand."

"The meeting is called for two o'clock. It will be three before we are all there. You are expected."

"Am I to go there with you?"

"No; you must make your way inside alone, and without any help at all. But I will be there."

"And Peters, too?"

"Sure."

"What time ought I to start?

"If you leave here at two o'clock sharp, you will be there in good time. Peters wishes the others to be there before you arrive."

"That's all right. Only, Turts, you have forgotten one important thing."

"No; I haven't. I was waiting for you to ask that. But I'll let you ask the question before I answer it."

"I don't know where to find the figure 1, in order to begin to take the sixteen paces, to start with."

"Precisely. Now, pay attention."

"I'm all attention."

"We are none of us permitted to tell where that is. We are not allowed to utter the direction in words, and so I take a pencil from my pocket, and also a bit of paper—the back of an envelope will do as well as anything else—and I write upon it—so. See?"

"Yes."

"Understand?"

"Yes."

"That tells you the corner where you are to begin."

"I'm on. I understand."

"Whenever you have occasion to write down the address, as I have just done, you show it to the interested party, as I have shown it to you, and then you tear off that penciling, just as I do now, and tear it up into little bits, as I am doing now. See?"

"Sure."

"Having done that, you chew it to a pulp and throw it away—so."

"It is a blazing good idea."

"Peters thinks he knows just why and how the Criminal Trust was broken up. He doesn't intend that the story of the Order of the Python shall be repeated in this case, and so he has arranged all the safeguards that I have described to you."

"Peter is smart, all right."

"To mention the address aloud is treason, and is punishable with death. Don't forget that on your life."

"I won't."

"A person could get to the meeting place by a much shorter route, as you will discover, when you get there, but it is also treason to use any other route than the one described to you."

"I understand."

"Whoever gets as far as the old woman, without satisfying her, no matter by what route he approaches, will be—well, he'll never get out alive. That ought to be enough."

"It is."

"There isn't any initiation and there isn't any oath to take. It's all included in what I have told you: but Peters swears himself that he will personally murder the man who joins this organization and fails to obey his orders."

"And what Peters says goes."

"You bet it does."

"Yes: and then, some."

"It is almost one o'clock now. You will leave here at two, Rats?"

"On the minute."

"We will be expecting you. Peters will wish to hear all about your interview with Nick Carter. And that reminds me again—He arrested you, didn't he?"

"He did that."

"How is it that you are out again so soon?"

"He just turned me loose."

"I wonder why? Carter isn't doing those things without reason."

"It ought to be easy enough to guess why, then."

"You mean that he has you shadowed?"

"I mean that he did have me shadowed—and say! It wouldn't surprise me a little to know that he or one of his assistants is here in this room now."

"Gee! You think so?"

"I'd bet on it."

Tufts wheeled in his tracks and began to search the room rapidly with his eyes, passing his glance from one to another of the men who were there, with lightning swiftness, and with a sharpness that even Patsy admired.

The glance lingered for a moment on the face of Nick Carter, but was stolidly returned, and presently it drifted on again to others.

When he turned back to Patsy once more, he said:

"There are just five men in this room whom I have never seen before. Of the five only two look as if they might be disguised. Wait here a moment."

He crossed the room rapidly to where Riordan was standing, talking with some of his patrons, and Patsy saw him draw the proprietor to one side and whisper eagerly and rapidly to him; and Riordan nodded all the time he was listening.

At the end of the conversation, Riordan nodded more vehemently than before, and the two men parted.

When Tufts returned to where Patsy was standing he said:

"It'll be all right now, Rats. You needn't give yourself any uneasiness about being followed out of this place. See you later. So long."

He was turning away, when Patsy reached out a hand and detained him.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Tell me what you have done."

Tufts smiled. "I've fixed it so that nobody will follow you when you go out of this saloon to-night," he said. "If anybody attempts it, somebody will be found in the river in the morning, that's all."

"Great Scott! How did you do that?"

"There are ways and means, as you will learn after to-night, Rats. Don't forget, now. You are to leave here at two, and go—you know where."

"I do."

"That's all, then. So long."

Patsy watched him as he sauntered jauntily across the room toward the door and finally slipped through it, and out, without being noticed, just as he had entered it when he came there to have an interview with the supposed Rats; and Patsy made up his mind then and there that Tufts, in his own way, was a far more dangerous criminal than Peters himself, for the reason that he was shrewder and sharper.

It was evident that he was a man of education, and that he possessed remarkable natural intelligence in addition to it.

The young assistant realized now that it was his duty, at all hazards, to warn Nick Carter without delay of the trap that had been laid for anybody who followed the supposed Rats from the building, for that it was Nick's intention to follow along behind him when he went out, he did not doubt.

But how to warn him without attracting the attention of the others present in the room; that was the problem.

CHAPTER IX.

NICK TAKES A HAND IN THE GAME.

Those who have followed Nick Carter throughout his career will remember that one of his accomplishments was that of an expert in the "lip-movement" language, such as is taught in institutions for the deaf and dumb.

It was one of the things that his father had compelled him to learn while he was a youth, for old Sim Carter had known that it would many times be of importance in the career his son had chosen. Nick had been sent to such an institution to acquire the science, himself playing the part of a deaf and dumb youth all the time he was there.

But the result had been what the old detective desired; Nick had come forth from the institution, entirely proficient, and from that day on he had been able to read what others were saying, by the movement of their lips, even though he could not hear a word that was being uttered.

Since Patsy's entrance into Riordan's saloon in his character as Rats, Nick had watched him narrowly, and he had been able to read much of the conversation that had taken place between the supposed Rats and Tufts by means of the lip movement already mentioned.

When Tufts left Patsy to cross the room and carry on that whispered conference with the proprietor Nick had watched him, and also the man to whom he was talking, and he had been so fortunately placed that he was able to read everything that passed between the two men.

In that respect as the reader knows, he was more fortunate than Patsy himself, for the latter could only guess what had been said.

But Nick Carter *knew* as well as if he had overheard each word that was uttered, and for the benefit of the reader, we will repeat here what that conversation was.

As soon as Tufts had drawn Riordan aside he said to him:

"I come from Peters, Riordan."

Riordan started a little, for he did not personally know Tufts; and he replied at once:

"What word does Peters send to me?"

"He told me to tell you that 'when the birds fly home at night, it is to their nests, and they don't like to have hawks hovering around them.'"

"Good!" replied Riordan, smiling, but nevertheless looking a bit uneasy, for the stilted reply had conveyed a distinct message to him. "Are there hawks about, then?"

"It is suspected that there is one at least; probably two."

"Have they names?"

"Nick Carter, and one of his assistants."

Riordan started at the mention of the name of the detective, but after a moment he responded:

"What are the orders?"

"You know the boy, Rats? The one who is called Rats?"

"Yes."

"He will leave here at two o'clock. He must not be followed."

"He shall not be."

"But this must be attended to strictly. He must not be followed."

"I understand."

"And any person, no matter who it may be, who attempts to follow him, must—you know."

"Must go to the river, I suppose."

"Exactly. Such are the orders. Rats goes from here to a place of meeting. He must not be followed. If any one attempts it, that one must be killed. That is the plain English of the matter."

"I understand," replied Riordan.

"You will attend to it?"

"I will."

"I will take the liberty of suggesting a way in which it can be attended to."

"Well?"

"Send three good men out before it is time for Rats to go. Let them be on the watch when the time comes for Rats to leave. Have them posted so there can be no mistake—and give them strict orders that any person who attempts to follow must be dead before he has gone a quarter of a mile. A bullet or a knife will do. It doesn't matter."

"It might be a serious matter to shoot a man down in the street near here at this time of the night."

Tufts shrugged his shoulders and for a moment made no reply. Then he said:

"Shall I report to Peters that you hesitated to carry out his orders?"

"No. Report to him that the man who follows Rats is already as good as dead."

"That's the way to talk. That will please Peters."

"Tell him I will attend to it. Rats can walk openly to the place of meeting if he desires with no fear that he will be followed, even if the man who attempts it is Nick Carter himself. I don't fail when I make a promise like that."

It was then that Tufts had returned to Patsy and assured him that he need have no fear that he would be shadowed; and it was then that Patsy began to wonder how he could warn his chief of the danger; but it was also then that Nick was already warned, having read by the lip movement, every word that had been uttered.

Nick knew that Patsy would have guessed something of what had taken place and would therefore be anxious to warn him, so he rose from his chair and strolled carelessly across the room, taking care to pass quite near to where Patsy was standing.

As he passed him he said in a low tone which he knew Patsy would hear and understand:

"I'm on. Go ahead and play a lone hand."

He passed on after that, went to the bar and ordered a drink—which he managed to rid himself of without swallowing it—and then, by easy stages he crossed the room toward the door and so finally let himself out of the place unobserved as he supposed.

Once safely outside he waited, for he knew that it would not be long before Riordan would send out the men who were to guard Rats; and he selected a dark doorway in which he concealed himself to wait.

Thus concealed he saw first one and then another, and then two others leave the place, so he concluded that Riordan had sent out four men instead of three as Tufts had suggested.

One of these took his stand near the entrance; another walked down the street and stationed himself on a corner there; a third went up the street to another corner, and the fourth walked away and disappeared.

But Nick knew that this last move was only a part of the game. He understood that the fourth man had merely stationed himself at a greater distance, to watch the others and see to it that no mistake occurred.

Taking the point of the fourth man's disappearance, he glided away himself, after him, and presently came upon him where he had slunk behind a flight of stone steps, to wait.

Nick walked directly up to this man and spoke to him.

"What time uh night is it, old feller?" he inquired.

The man who was waiting looked at the detective suspiciously for a moment, and then replied:

"It's about half-past one, or a quarter to two."

"That's what I was thinking. And can you tell me where Riordan's place is at?" inquired the detective, with a touch of the South in his manner of speaking.

"Yes. It's down that way a block, and then two blocks to your right. But you can't get in there at this time of the night unless the boss knows you."

"Oh, he knows me all right. But it's a young gun who goes there that I'm looking for."

"Go and look for him then, and leave me alone."

"Waiting for your girl, are you?" laughed the detective.

"That's none of your business."

"Right. It ain't. I'm looking for a feller that is called Rats. Do you know him?"

"Rats, eh?"

"Yes."

"He ain't there."

"No? How do you know that?"

"Because I just came out uh there. He wasn't there then."

"Maybe he has gone in since then."

"He ain't there, I tell you."

"Maybe I'll find him walking along here if I wait long enough. You look to me just as if you was about waiting for him."

"Look here, *you!* Who the devil are you, anyhow?"

Nick's reply was a sudden blow struck straight from the shoulder, and before which the man to whom he had been talking went down as if he had been hit by a hammer.

He was senseless, too, when he struck the pavement; and the detective stood over him for a moment looking at him.

Then, with an enigmatical smile on his face, he quickly went through the man's pockets, removing everything of value from them as deftly as if he were the most accomplished footpad.

That done, he dragged his victim into the areaway under the steps, and with a hypodermic syringe, injected just sufficient morphine into the man's arm to keep him quiet for an hour or two; and so he left him, having borrowed his hat.

Then he took up his station where the other man had been standing, and awaited events.

They came presently.

He had been standing there not more than fifteen minutes when he saw Patsy in his character as Rats come along the street toward him, and not far behind him walked one of the other three men who had been placed on watch.

Nick remained perfectly still and permitted them to pass him, for they were on the opposite side of the street, and as he had withdrawn more deeply into the shadow, they could not discover that the man near the steps was not their own pal.

They had gone past and disappeared, when the third man came into view, and he turned a corner in a different direction, as if the course that Patsy would follow ultimately was already known to them.

But when the third man turned the corner into a lonely street, Nick pursued him, and as soon as they were out of view from the street he left, he ran forward on tiptoes, and so overtook the man before he had an idea that he was followed at all.

But he had no chance to defend himself, for Nick was upon him before he could turn, and another blow like that other one laid him low.

And here Nick resorted to the same tactics he had pursued before, stripping his pockets of everything they contained, and finally injecting the morphine into his veins and leaving him slumbering in an areaway.

But when that was done, the detective started rapidly ahead, without giving any further heed to Patsy and the two men who were still watching over him.

For Nick had read enough of the conversation that had taken place between Patsy and Tufts to know where to go to find the figure 1 and take the sixteen paces; and he proposed to be there when Patsy arrived.

He was fairly well assured in his own mind that the two men would not follow him as far as that. They would have turned about and returned to Riordan's long before Patsy arrived at that point.

But back at Riordan's there would be two men who would not report; two men who would have strange tales to tell when they did show up; tales of a knock-down and a robbery which would seem strange to them, and which would seem stranger to Riordan himself.

In carrying out the robbery part of it, Nick had only hoped that among the things he took from their pockets he would find something of value to him in his pursuit of Peters, the shrewd crook, and the gang he had organized.

He was turning these things over in his mind and wondering just what he would do when the time came, when Patsy appeared.

CHAPTER X.

THE OLD HAG AT THE DOORWAY.

The detective had determined on a bold and resolute course for the balance of the night.

He had no doubt whatever of Patsy's ability to carry out the plan that had been assigned to him, and yet for reasons of his own, he wished to be at the place of meeting of the gang of outlaws that Peters had organized.

More than that, he had an idea that perhaps Patsy was in some danger.

The crooks against whom he was pitted were of the shrewdest in the great city, and it was possible that they had not been so completely hoodwinked as they seemed to be, about the events of that day and night.

It was even possible that they suspected Patsy, and were only playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse. They might know already that Rats—the real Rats—was a prisoner in the power of the great detective, and if they did know it, they might be leading Patsy into a trap, in order to force Nick Carter to make terms with them through him.

Nick had not liked the manner, the method, or the words of Tufts.

The young scoundrel had appeared too confident of the game he was playing, and he had thrown out too many hints about the speedy promotion of "Rats" to be in keeping with the rest of his character.

Tufts belonged to the cold-blooded school of criminals, and Nick argued that even if he had believed that Rats was to be a subject of speedy promotion, he would have been the last to tell him so.

While the detective was making his way from Riordan's to the place where Patsy was to find the figure 1, he had been thinking deeply, and he had come to the conclusion in his own mind that the criminals already suspected that "Rats" was not all he appeared to be.

Even if they did not doubt he was the real Rats, they might have argued that, having been in the power of the detective, he had been won over, and was not to be trusted.

Anyhow, Nick was convinced that they did not mean well by their new recruit; and if Patsy was in danger, Nick wanted to be on hand to protect him.

He did another thing, too. He examined the effects he had taken from the pockets of the two men he had attacked.

In them he found the usual conglomeration of things—knives, pistols, a little money, etc.

In each of them he had found a copy of that strange paper which Rats had possessed, and which Nick had copied; and in the pocket of the last man he had attacked he discovered a written note from Peters himself, signed by Peters, which read:

"I hereby promise that when you deliver to me the right hand of Nick Carter as you have agreed to do, to give you ten thousand dollars in cash. PETERS."

It was a small thing of itself, but it told quite eloquently how implacable was the hatred of Peters for him. It told the detective that this man he had knocked down had at one time or another doubtless boasted that he would overcome Nick Carter; and that he had been dared to do so.

Nick had no doubt that Peters had bantered the man. Probably he had told him that he did not care so much for the detective's life, as he hoped to render him somehow helpless, and had dared the thief to catch Carter and cut off his right hand. And then he had had the temerity to offer the fellow ten thousand dollars for it.

It meant nothing, of course; only it did tell of the hatred of the man for Nick, and it did reveal how determined Peters was to put the detective out of the way if it could be accomplished.

The detective believed now that Peters had sworn to exterminate his entire household, and that would include Chick and Patsy as well as himself.

"Perhaps," he thought to himself, just as Patsy appeared, walking toward him, "they think they already have Patsy in their power; or they may even think that the supposed Rats is myself. Well, I'll fool them before the night is over."

And then Patsy came.

Nick stepped back into a deep shadow as Patsy approached, but as the young assistant drew near the detective pitched a tightly wadded ball of paper to the pavement in front of him, and said in a tone that was meant only for him to hear:

"Stop under a street-light and read it!"

Patsy did so a moment later, and he read:

"Go ahead and don't appear to see me, no matter what happens. Be on the watch for danger. I think you are suspected; but go through with the plan. I shall not be far away. I know about the old woman, and I shall make no move until you get to her, unless something happens to make me do so."

It was not signed, but Nick had written it while he awaited the arrival of his assistant.

There is no need to give here again the formula by which Patsy was obliged to approach the secret place of meeting.

The numbers 1, 2, 7 and 9, with the paces and the directions between them were all followed out religiously by the assistant, and in each case the program worked out just as it had been described to him.

But Nick had shrewdly suspected all along that this was only a part of the blind that Peters and Tufts had fixed up to lead him more surely and more securely into the trap, and so, while Patsy fulfilled the directions that had been given him, Nick waited, for he did not believe that any guard would be left over the several places after Patsy had passed them.

He believed that there was a much shorter way to the place of meeting, and that Patsy had been directed to take this particular one only to impress him with the importance of it, and to convince him more surely that he was getting at the secrets of the organization.

He waited fifteen minutes after Patsy had passed the signal points before he himself made any alarm; and

then, when he did give one, there was—as he had anticipated—no reply.

The guard had gone away after Patsy passed the point; and so the detective passed on to the second place and then to the third one, and always with the same results.

He smiled when he found that the last tack he made, according to the directions that Tufts had given Patsy, took him to a doorway in a wall of a house on another street. He had passed entirely through one block. Tufts had not been exact.

But here, when he rapped at the door, he was confronted by the old woman; and she fulfilled perfectly the description that had been given of her.

A more repulsive-looking old hag Nick had never seen in all his career, and she grinned at the detective frightfully when she told him that he was not expected there that night.

But he made her no reply. He remembered the instructions that had been given to Patsy about keeping silent until he received a certain signal, and he followed them.

"Peters didn't tell me that there were two of you," she grumbled. "What's all this fuss about, anyhow?"

Nick made no reply.

"You're a likely chap, ain't you?" demanded the hag. "I've a good mind to drive you out of the place. What did you come here for, say?"

The detective remained silent.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow? Haven't you got a tongue in your head?" she cried out at last, as if greatly exasperated; and that being the signal, Nick replied:

"Yours will answer for both of us. Now lead on, confound you, and don't stand there muttering any longer."

She grinned at him at this.

"Come," she said. "Only, I may as well tell you before I take you any farther that I feel good and sorry for you."

"What for?" asked the detective, halting in the step he had been about to take.

"If you don't guess, there ain't no use in my telling you, young man," she replied. "You have chosen to come this far, and maybe its as well that you go the rest of the distance."

"Wait," said Nick. "Will you tell me what you are talking about?"

"No; I won't," said the woman.

Nick took a yellowback twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and held it so that her greedy eyes could see it.

"Perhaps you would like to own that?" he suggested.

"Wouldn't I, though! I never had one uh them in my life."

"Well, you shall have this one if you will tell me exactly what you meant by what you said just now."

"I didn't mean anything at all," she grumbled.

"Oh, yes you did."

"I tell you I didn't."

Nick returned the bill to his pocket.

"Then you don't want this yellowback," he said.

"Oh, I do, I do!"

"Tell me what you meant, then."

"Give me the bill and I'll tell you," she whispered, leaning forward.

The detective produced a second bill exactly like the first one, and put it with the other.

"I'll give you both when you have told me all you know about this affair," he said.

The woman's eyes almost stuck out of her head at the sight of so much money. She breathed hard, but still she hesitated. It was evident that she stood in great terror of the men who employed her.

Nick found a ten-dollar bill to put with the other two. He felt that she had information that was worth all the fifty dollars, if she could be prevailed upon to give it, and he knew that if he could only overcome her fears, she would tell all she knew. He reached out the ten-dollar bill and let her take it in her hand.

"Now talk!" he said imperiously. "There is ten dollars, to convince you that I mean what I say; and when you have told me all you meant just now, and have answered some questions I shall ask you, you shall have the remaining forty. That will make fifty dollars in all. Now, speak up if you want the money, for I am getting tired of waiting."

She gasped for breath. She hesitated again; then she leaned toward him and murmured huskily:

"I'm afraid, sir."

"I know you are. That is why I offer you the fifty."

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know what you meant by what you said to me just now."

"Suppose I didn't mean anything at all?"

"Then you don't get the forty, that I hold here; and

what's more, I'll take back the ten I have already given you."

"You shall not have it!"

"You can't help yourself if I want to take it from you."

"Wait, then. What was it I said?"

"You said there were two of us, and you spoke as if the other one and I were victims of some sort of crooked business. Say, are we going to get the double-cross in there, old woman? Tell me that."

"Will you give me the money if I will tell?"

"If you will give truthful replies to all my questions, I will."

"All right; ask 'em. I'll answer, only you've got to promise me one thing."

"What have I got to promise?"

"You must promise that you'll let me go after I have answered your questions. I can get away with the fifty. I know where I can hide so that Peters can't find me."

"All right," said Dick. "I promise. Now talk!"

"I'll talk. Listen."

"Go ahead, then."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WAY TO THE TORTURE-CHAMBER.

"I'm an old woman, sir, and once, a very long time ago, I used to be a good woman. Sometimes I remember that—sometimes when I see young men like you and that other one, who went inside a little while before you came," began the old woman tremulously; for she had not yet fully overcome her terrors. "I had the feeling to say something to save him when I saw him go inside, but I didn't dare, for Peters or Tufts would kill me. And I ain't fit to die."

"What is it all about?" asked the detective.

"I'll tell you in a minute. It ain't right for you to go in there, of your own accord, just to be murdered, is it?"

"No; it doesn't seem right," admitted the detective, with a smile.

"Well, that is what you are doing—that is, if you go inside. They are waiting for you, just as they were waiting for him."

"For the other one who went in first, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Who was waiting for him—and for me?"

"They didn't say anything about you—only I knew that it was all right when you answered to the signals properly."

"Who was waiting for him—and for me."

"Peters, and the others."

"What others?"

"Tufts, and the rest of them."

"How many are there in there?"

"Eight or ten; maybe more. I don't know. Sometimes they go in the other way, and I don't see them all."

"So there is another way, is there?"

"Yes."

"Where is that?"

"Around by the other street."

"Are any of them likely to come out this way while we are talking?"

"No; if they were, I wouldn't be talking."

"That is what I thought. Now, you say there are eight or ten, or perhaps more than that, in that room inside, eh?"

"No. Not in that room, nor in the next one; but in the big room at the top of the next house beyond."

"Oh. I see. And you were to take me there, were you? To show me the way there?"

"They didn't say anything about there being two of you. I took the other young man to that room and rapped on the door, as they told me to do it. And then they took him inside, that is all I know about it."

"But you said he was going there to be murdered."

"So he is. He may be dead by this time, although it isn't likely. They will want to play with him a while yet. Peters always likes to do that."

"How do you know that they intend to murder him?"

"Because my son told me so."

"Who is your son?"

"Tufts."

"Oho. He is, eh? And what did he tell you about it?"

"He said the young fellow was called Rats, and that he had been peaching on them to the detective that is called Nick Carter. Then he laughed, and he said that maybe they would be catching Nick Carter himself, or one of his assistants, when they caught Rats, for it would be just like the detective, he said, to appear as Rats and try to play his part."

"What more did he say about that? Did he say that they were going to make any effort to find out if it was the real Rats or not?"

"Yes."

"How were they going to do it? Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."

"How was it?"

"They were going to put him to some sort of torture to make him tell the truth. They were going to make believe it was some sort of initiation, so that if it was Rats, after all, he would suppose it was all a part of the game. At least, that is what Tufts said."

"What else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"What sort of torture would they be likely to use?"

"Oh, anything that came handy. Peters loves that sort of thing, and so does Tufts. They are that cruel. They will probably brand him with hot irons; they'll put his thumbs into little wooden vises, and squeeze them, or they will shut him in an iron cage with a hive of bees, and then stir up the bees until they begin to sting. They have all that sort of thing up there in the big room."

"What else?"

"Well, one man they had they tied down on the floor and tickled his feet until he was senseless; and sometimes they force their victims to do all sorts of things that are too dreadful to mention."

"Go on. Do you know that it was intended to subject Rats to that sort of thing?"

"Of course I do."

"You say that big room where they meet is at the top of the next house?"

"Yes."

"Is there more than one entrance to that room?"

"There are three."

"Do you know them all?"

"I do. I take care of the room each time when they are through using it; and often I find blood on the floor—great blotches of it, too."

"Tell me about those three entrances. What are they, and where are they?"

"One is from this house, as you already know. One is from the house on the opposite side of it, and the third one—the one they use the most—is directly up through the floor from that same house by a stairway that they pull up after them."

"So it is that particular house where they make their headquarters, is it?"

"Yes."

"And they only send a man around this way so that he won't know what house he is in for certain?"

"That is the idea."

"Now, I must go to that room, old woman. I must save that other young man who has gone in there ahead of me. Which entrance ought I to make use of, to be on the safest side of the business?"

"There ain't any safe side to it. You'll be killed if you go near to that room. The best thing for you to do will be to light out of here as quick as you know how."

"Would you have me leave the other young man to die without going to his assistance?"

"You can't do him any good, and it is better for one to be murdered than for both of you, isn't it?"

"We won't argue the point. Answer my question."

"What was it?"

"Which would be the best one of the three entrances for me to use?"

"There ain't any best."

"Is it likely that any of their gang are in that same house under them on the watch?"

"No. They'd all be in that room seeing the fun."

"Does the stairs you describe, that they pull up after them, lead directly into the room?"

"Into a sort of alcove at one end of it. It is divided off from the room by a heavy curtain."

"Can the stairway be lowered from below?"

"Yes; if you know how to do it."

"Do you know how to do it?"

"Yes. Of course. I take care of the room for them. I clean it."

"Will you take me there and show me how to use the stairway?"

"Not on your life, sir. I wouldn't dare. They'll kill me, anyhow——"

"If you will take me there, to that house, and to the spot where the stairway can be lowered, and if then you will show me how to lower it, I will wait until you have had time to get out of the house before I touch it, and I will give you another fifty dollars to go with this—so you will have a hundred. Will you do that?"

"I dassent."

"But think! You will have a hundred dollars."

"I'm thinking about it, all right. If I only thought——"

"Well, what?"

"If I only thought that I would have time to get away——"

"I told you that I would wait and give you time."

"How long will you wait?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Suppose, while you were waiting, you should hear the other young man being tortured, and that he should shriek out in his agony, would you still wait?"

"You give me a hard one, old woman. But I will promise you this: I will promise you that no harm shall come to you this night for what you do to aid me. Come; there is the rest of the first fifty. When I stand beside those movable stairs, and you have showed me how to lower them, you shall have fifty more. Is it a bargain?"

"You'll let me get away?"

"Yes, I tell you."

"Even if the other young man screams out?"

"Those men who are now in that room shall not catch you. Besides, it will never occur to them that you have showed me in that way. If we went in the same way you took the other victim to them they might think so; but they will suppose that I have followed one of themselves directly to the house, if they have time to think anything about it."

"Aren't you afraid of being killed yourself?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Who are you, then? I have never seen you before."

"No; but you have been talking about me ever since I came in."

"Who are you, then?"

"If I will tell you, will you take me to the stairs, and then accept the other fifty?"

"Yes. I'll do it if I get killed for it. Who are you."

"I am the man you have been talking about. I am Nick Carter, and the other young man is my assistant."

The old woman started away from the detective and stood staring at him, speechless with surprise. Presently she demanded:

"Is that on the level, sir? Are you Nick Carter?"

"Yes. I am."

"And if I take you there will you promise me that no harm shall come to me?"

"I will promise that no harm shall come to you this night if I can protect you, and if you will hurry away the moment you have shown me the stairway."

"Then follow me. I'll do it."

She started away, shuffling along the floor with surprising haste for one of her years; and Nick followed along closely behind her.

He felt that now he was about to face a condition which would require all his courage.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST OF THE MALIGNANT CROOK.

They had passed across most of the intervening distance toward their goal when the woman stopped suddenly in her tracks, and, turning to Nick, said in a hoarse whisper:

"You'll have to promise me one more thing, Mr. Carter, or I go back on my promise now."

"What is it?" asked the detective.

"You must promise that it shall n't go hard with my Jamie. That is, Tufts. He's my own boy, only he's always been a bad one. But he's mine, and I'm his mother. I couldn't rest easy in my grave, when I go to it, if I had it to remember that I had done him dirt. You'll promise that?"

"Yes; if he will take his chance for escape, and make it. I have nothing against him. I don't want him, and am not looking for him. It is Peters I want."

"And Peters you'll get, this night, or I'm mistaken. Now, then."

She led the way in silence after that.

They passed from house to house by way of the cellars, but presently they ascended to the parlor floor, and the old woman led the way into the room that was under the one she had described to the detective.

There were no stairs in sight; nothing but bare walls; but the woman, holding her candle aloft, led the way to a wardrobe that was set into the wall, and, opening it, disclosed the fact that there was an opening through the top of it to the ceiling above them.

At the back of this inclosure she drew aside one of the matched boards, revealing a small rope such as yachtsmen use for halyards; and then she leaned toward the detective, and whispered:

"When the fifteen minutes you are to wait are past, when the time is up, you take hold of this cord"—and she touched one of the two—"and pull gently but firmly upon it. If you pull slow and steady, the stairs will not make the slightest noise, and presently they will drop down inside of this place, with just enough room for you to get onto them."

"And what do I find at the top when I have ascended."

"I told you that. They take you into an alcove at the rear of the room above, and there is a curtain that divides it from the room. I don't know what you'll do when you get up there. You'll have to decide that for yourself, but it's my own opinion that you'll say your prayers and wish that you'd never made me bring you here. Now, I'm going."

Nick gave her the money he had promised her, and watched her as she shuffled noiselessly away. He could hear only a faint sound as she descended the stairs; and he stood there in total darkness—for he had told her to take the candle with her when she went, inasmuch as he had his electric-torch with him.

He had looked at his watch when she started away, and now, when he supposed the fifteen minutes must surely be passed, he pressed the button of his torch and looked again; but to find that only seven minutes of the allotted fifteen had expired.

But he kept his word and waited, listening intently all the time for noises from the room above.

None came to him save at times a low murmur of voices, or the sound of shuffling feet as some person moved them on the floor above him.

When the time was up he pulled upon the cord as he had been told to do, and found to his satisfaction that the old woman had not deceived him.

The stairway came down to him noiselessly. He felt satisfied there was no sound that could have been heard by those in the room overhead, and, unless one of the men happened to enter the alcove and see what was happening, he believed they would have no warning of his approach.

As soon as he could reach the stairway he guided it with his hand, and presently, when it was firmly upon the floor where he was standing, he prepared himself for the ascent, and for what was likely to happen after it.

"Would Patsy have already become a victim of those men?" he asked himself. "Had he done wrong in promising the old woman that he would wait fifteen minutes? Would those very fifteen minutes prove fatal to his loved assistant?"

With careful tread he mounted the steps, pressing upon each one slowly until it sustained his full weight, so that it would not creak or snap; and so he went up and up, until at last he pushed his head through the hole in the floor where the stairs had dropped down to him.

He could hear voices—or, rather, a voice—plainly enough now; and he listened while he pulled himself out upon the floor of the alcove behind the curtain.

He recognized the voice of Peters at once; and he knew that the man was addressing Patsy, just as he also realized that he had himself only arrived in time. Peters was saying:

"I have sworn the extermination of that entire household, Patsy. It wasn't my intention that you should be the first to go, and, even now, if you will change your mind and betray Nick Carter into my hands, or do something to lure him here in search of you, I will let up on you to the extent of sparing your life. If you refuse once more you shall die, here and now; at once; without any delay. What do you say?"

"I say just what I said before, Peters," replied the voice of Patsy as calmly as if he were discussing an every-day question. "You are wasting your breath."

"Then I won't waste any more of it. We really thought you were Rats, until Tufts tried you with that question he asked. You thought that Tufts and Rats were unknown to each other, but, on the contrary, they have been friends a long time. Once more now, will you——"

"Oh, dry up, Peters! You make me real tired! You do, honestly. You know that you waste your breath when you talk to me that way. You know mighty well that if I had a thousand lives, and you'd give me nine hundred and ninety-nine of them for the betrayal of Nick Carter, I'd see you hanged first."

"I mean what I say, Patsy, about killing you," said Peters.

"Oh, I have never doubted that."

"I'm going to kill you."

"I suppose that to be your intention."

"I'm going to do it now."

"Then why don't you begin, and not talk so much about it?"

"I'm going to shoot you dead. All that talk about torture was rot. I have never intended to torture you, or Nick Carter, when I get him. I only want you all out of the way; and I guess the quickest way is the best way. Have you got anything more to say, Patsy?"

"Not a word."

"Any message for me to give to Carter when I get him?"

"No, because you won't get him. He will get you—and he will know, better than you could tell him, all that the message would be."

"Say your prayers, then, Patsy, for your time has come. I am going to count ten, slowly, and when I say ten, you will get a bullet through your brain."

Patsy was pale, but he was calm. He honestly believed that his time had come. He never expected to leave that room alive when Peters began to count, leaving a long space between each count he mentioned.

But just as Peters said "Three!" something compelled Patsy to raise his eyes, and, as he was seated so that he faced the curtain behind which Nick Carter had ascended to that floor, you can imagine what his sensations were when he saw the face of Nick Carter peering out at him from behind it.

It so happened that there were only four men in that room besides Patsy, and the detective himself. The old woman had been mistaken in that particular—or she had been deceived.

But there were four there. They were Peters, Tufts, and two other crooks, whom the detective did not know, but men after the same type as Peters himself.

All this time Peters was counting steadily, holding a cocked revolver in his right hand while he did so, and with the muzzle pointing steadily at Patsy's heart. The man was determined in the course he had adopted, and it was evident that nothing would move him from his purpose.

He had reached the count of six before Nick made up his mind what to do, and the thing he did do was characteristic of the man.

Almost anybody else, under like circumstances, would have opened the proceedings by shooting Peters down, remorselessly—or, at least, by shooting some of the men who were there in that room, for all were equally determined to kill Patsy, and all were morally as guilty of the crime as if it had already been committed.

But Nick believed that he could capture them all alive, and he wanted Peters alive, anyhow, and in those few seconds he had taken in the situation thoroughly.

Patsy was, of course, bound tightly to his chair; that is, he was fastened to it by a strong cord that had been passed several times around his body and the chair together, and it was tied behind; but Patsy's feet and hands were not bound.

Peters' three companions were standing near him and a little behind him. They were watching the proceedings intently, and with never a thought of interruption. Their faces were toward the prisoner, and their eyes were upon their own chief; their backs were therefore toward the detective when he stepped out from behind the curtain into the room and slowly raised his weapon, aiming it with great care at the pistol that Peters held in his hand.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The explosion of the weapon sounded like a thunderclap in that room. The bullet from it struck fairly against the weapon that Peters held in his grasp, not only knocking it spinning in the air across the room, but thoroughly benumbing the hand of the malignant crook.

The report of the pistol, the whirling weapon, and the resounding oath from Peters, all seemed to come together; but even at that, before one of the men could turn to discover what had happened, Nick had leaped among them and upon them, striking out to the right and left, and felling a man with each blow he delivered.

While one might have counted three they were all down in a heap upon the floor, and Nick had leaped toward Patsy, had managed to cut the cord that held him to the chair, and had thrust a pistol into his hand.

Peters seemed to know instinctively who had attacked him. The instant he was down he was up again, but this time Nick attacked him alone, leaving Patsy to keep the rest of them covered.

And Nick Carter did another characteristic thing then. He seized Peters in the iron grip of his left hand and backed him across the room against the wall; and then, holding him there, he rained blow after blow upon him with the right hand, until he had pounded the scoundrel's face almost to a jelly.

At last he dropped him, and Peters sank to the floor almost unconscious, but with as little resemblance to what he had been as it is possible to imagine.

"That is the only punishment I shall ever have an opportunity to give you, Peters," said the detective grimly, "but it has been a source of great satisfaction to do that. You would have murdered that lad in cold blood if I hadn't got here in time to prevent it. But now you are going back to prison, and I am going to see to it personally that you stay there until you are sent to the electric-chair for that other great crime of yours."

And he did.

THE END.

The next number (574) will contain "The Mystery of the Empty Grave; or, Nick Carter's Deal from a Cold Deck."

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

NEW YORK, December 21, 1907.

TERMS TO NICK CARTER WEEKLY MAIL SUBSCRIBERS.

(*Postage Free.*)

Single Copies or Back Numbers, 5c. Each.

3 months	65c.	One year	$2.60
4 months	85c.	2 copies one year	5.00
6 months	$1.25	1 copy two years	5.00

How to Send Money—By post-office or express money order, registered letter, bank check or draft, at our risk. At your own risk if sent by currency, coin, or postage stamps in ordinary letter.

Receipts—Receipt of your remittance is acknowledged by proper change of number on your label. If not correct you have not been properly credited, and should let us know at once.

OSMOND G. SMITH, } *Proprietors.*
GEORGE C. SMITH, }

STREET & SMITH, Publishers,
79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

Many strange instances are given where released convicts carry out some mad vow made while behind the bars. Nick Carter has several times been the object of just such hatred and desire for revenge. There are several recent happenings along this order that merit attention.

A most cruel and purposeless murder was recently committed in the French convict island of New Caledonia. The victim was a missionary, who was found lying in the bush near his house, with his head battered in. The crime was traced to a newly released convict, a native Polynesian, and when taxed with his guilt he did not attempt to deny it. "I was convicted without reason," he declared; "therefore, I swore that when I was liberated I would kill the first white man whom I met."

This is not the only case on record of convicts having made strange vows during their terms of imprisonment, and afterward carrying them out to the letter. A man named Hobelt was arrested about a year ago in Switzerland on a charge of arson. Investigation by the police went to show that Hobelt had been responsible for more than a dozen serious fires in the canton during the previous four years. The man, it was proved, had been in jail for larceny some six years before, and a warder swore to having heard him say that when he got out he would first burn his prosecutor's home down, and then those of all his enemies.

John Marsham, son of a wealthy St. Louis banker, got into trouble while tipsy, was arrested, and sent to prison for some months.

His father was furiously angry, and turned the boy off without a penny, to make his own living. Young Marsham then swore that he would do all in his power to destroy the liquor traffic. He joined the Rechabites and became a Prohibitionist speaker. Shortly afterward his father died, and left everything to his son. The young man's first act, upon taking possession of his late father's house, was to pour nearly $25,000 worth of the choicest wines and spirits down the drains.

This was one instance of good that followed the vow of an imprisoned man—he realized who his greatest enemy was, and meant to fight liquor all his life.

Another odd case of a convict vow was that of Miles Jackson, a Kentucky mountaineer, who was imprisoned for taking what he considered to be just vengeance on an enemy. He shot the man dead with a rifle, and but that there was a plea of self-defense he would undoubtedly have been hanged. He had a sentence of ten years, and his dreary life in the penitentiary undoubtedly drove him partly insane. When he came out he had the impression that every one could see by merely looking at him that he had been in prison. He therefore swore that no one should look upon his face again. He hid himself in one of the limestone caverns under Stony Mountain, and never emerged from his refuge, except upon the darkest nights. This dreadful death-in-life existence went on for nearly fourteen years, and the hermit of Stony Mountain became an object of curiosity to all the country round. Then came a great blizzard, and after it was over Jackson was found dead in the snow, about a hundred yards from the mouth of his refuge. He had evidently gone out to collect fire-wood.

Perhaps the most dangerous of any living ex-convict is the human brute known as "Soiled Donald," who haunts a lonely expanse of mountain and forest beyond Allegash, in northern Maine. The story is that this man, who barely escaped a death-sentence for killing a man in a tavern brawl, swore while in prison to take vengeance upon mankind at large. More than one sportsman has mysteriously disappeared amid the forests of Allegash, and, rightly or wrongly, "Soiled Donald" bears the blame. The man, who is at best a savage hermit, has the appearance of a modern Robinson Crusoe. His brawny body is covered with coarse hair, and his only garments are made of moose-hide and bearskin.

A snake-charmer can, by a simple motion of his hand, make a moving snake stop instantly. The reason is this:

The snake is a most timid animal. His eyes, while dull to color and form, are quick to motion, especially if it is rapid. If any large thing moves very quickly too near him, he gets frightened and scurries off; while at certain distances the motion stops him, if he be moving.

He stops from astonishment, fear, or the wish to see what it is that moves. Hence he glides on, unconscious of the charmer's presence near him so long as the latter remains perfectly quiet; the snake doesn't know him from a tree or a rock.

But when he gives a sudden evidence of life, the snake is astonished, and immediately remains stock-still.

In India and Africa, the charmers pretend the snake dance to the music, but they do not, for they never hear it. A snake has no external ears, and perhaps gives evidence of sound only through its skin, when sound causes bodies in contact with him to vibrate.

They hear also through the nerves of the tongue, but do not at all comprehend sound as we do. However, the snake's

eyes are very much alive to the motions of the charmer, or to the moving drumsticks of his confederate, and, being alarmed, he attempts to strike.

A dancing cobra—and no other snakes dance—is simply a cobra alarmed and in a posture of attack. He is not dancing to the music, but is making ready to assail the charmer.

A STRANGE NEW-YEAR'S CALL.

BY E. H. LEWIS.

Teddy Walton kept a little store on one of the side streets of San Francisco.

It was not of great importance, neither did his name figure among the merchant princes of the Golden Gate City, but it furnished income enough to support Teddy's aged mother and himself, besides paying tuition of a crippled brother at the State college.

The business was that of stationery, newspapers, and other publications, and the modest sign over the door of the small shop stated also that Edward Walton conducted a lending-library, where novels could be obtained at the uniform price of five cents per week.

This latter scheme was not the least productive of Teddy's establishment, as quite a number of people residing in that quarter of the city patronized him.

His shelves held a generous number of the latest novels displayed in an attractive form; the "finding catalogue" was always written up to date, and the youthful proprietor was at all times courteous and willing to oblige, so it is not to be wondered at that even some of the older and eminently respectable neighbors called occasionally to satisfy their literary cravings.

Among the latter was an old man with snowy-white hair and bent figure.

He was known on the street as Colonel Coates, and rumor had it that his title was a relic of ancient "ranger" times.

Be that as it may, he was a good customer of Teddy's, so when one day a servant called at the little store with a polite note, asking the young merchant to step around to his house on the next street for a few moments, the youth made haste to obey.

It was New-year's morning, but in the genial climate of California there was nothing in the outer aspect of the day to remind an Eastern man of the fact.

Snow was conspicuous by its absence, and instead of the cold, biting winds and ear-tingling blasts, a balmy air swept through the green foliage of the trees.

Teddy was immediately ushered into the presence of the colonel, finding him stretched out upon a couch nursing on old wound received in some by-gone battle.

Motioning him to a seat, Colonel Coates gazed steadily at him for a moment, then murmured, half-aloud:

"Yes, I think he'll do; I think he'll do."

Teddy sat on the edge of the soft-cushioned chair, rather nonplused at his reception.

He had thought the summons came from a desire of the old man's for some particular book, but he was soon to learn differently.

At last the colonel seemed satisfied with his scrutiny, and asked suddenly:

"Have you the rest of the day at your disposal, Walton?"

Teddy thought of the shop, and then remembering that it was New-year's, concluded that he could close up to oblige such a valuable customer.

"Yes, sir," he replied simply.

"It will be worth your while, and I can guarantee you five times the amount you would otherwise make," continued Coates grimly. Then he added: "Do you see this?"

He held up an oblong piece of paper which Teddy had no difficulty in recognizing as a hundred-dollar bill, so he promptly replied that he not only saw it, but knew its value.

"Well, it will be yours if you consent to do that which I am now going to explain," said the old man impressively. "Listen carefully, and reflect before you reply, as it is no light matter.

"First: are you brave?"

Teddy was not certain, but he nodded his head from sheer bewilderment.

"Good! I really believe you are, from your appearance. Now, secondly: do you believe in ghosts?"

"Most emphatically, no, sir," the youth found voice to reply, with a vigorous shake of his head.

"Humph! you don't, eh? Well, that is just what I want you to be to-night, at twelve by the clock."

Teddy stared at the colonel in profound astonishment. Had he suddenly turned insane?

"Ghost, sir? I—I—don't understand," he managed to gasp.

"Of course you don't, and small wonder. But enough of this beating about the bush. What I want you to do is to help me in a little detective matter I have on hand. You are, no doubt, surprised to hear that I am in that line of business, but it is a fact, nevertheless.

"To speak briefly, I have a commission to ferret out the perpetrators of a bold robbery which took place on Nob Hill about five months ago. I and other detectives have been engaged on the case ever since, and the only clue we have secured is connected with the butler, an old Englishman employed in the residence.

"We are positive he was a party to the robbery, and that he is aware of the place where the plate and jewelry are concealed, but there are others—expert crackmen—whom we wish to arrest also, and if we take the butler into custody it will alarm the others.

"Now, there is only one line we can work on with any surety of success. It is this: the servant, whose name is John Winterbottom, is a firm believer in spiritualism. He also had an assistant in the house, whom we likewise suspected as being in the plot. He was a lad about your age, and, from a picture of him I have seen, I think you resemble him somewhat. This lad was drowned while out sailing in the bay several months ago, and our idea is for you to personate him and command the old scoundrel to confess.

"We have selected this day because we understand the butler will attend a spiritualistic meeting to-night,

and his mind will be primed for impressions. Now, before you consent, I want to tell you frankly that you may be placed in some little danger—this is why I asked if you were brave—and then, again, you may not. The money we are willing to pay is quite a sum for a few hours' work, as you can but acknowledge. Of course, you will appear before him alone, but we'll not be far away. What do you say?"

During the time the old colonel had been speaking, Teddy was experiencing various degrees of surprise. First, the announcement that the old man, the mild-mannered Colonel Coates, was a detective, greatly astonished him; then the story of the robbery, and the part he was now asked to play, filled him with amazement; but all this time he did not forget the reward, and when he was requested to answer, he did so promptly.

"I will do it, sir," he said.

"Ah! I am so glad to hear it, Walton," responded the colonel, and his gratified expression bore out the statement. "Now, as that is settled, we will proceed with the preparations. It is now ten o'clock, and I expect a brother detective here in a few moments. Ah, here he is now."

The servant had just entered the room, accompanied by a solemn-looking man dressed in sober garments. He glanced shrewdly at Teddy on being introduced, and seemed satisfied with his appearance.

After a few minutes' conversation, the three entered a carriage waiting at the door, and were driven across the city to the fashionable residence district familiarly known as "Nob Hill."

The colonel had recovered sufficiently to make the journey without much difficulty, but he still felt himself, as he termed it, "disabled from active service."

After partaking of dinner in an adjacent restaurant, the long afternoon was passed in rehearsing their parts in the coming comedy, or tragedy, as the case might turn out.

At eleven o'clock they were secretly admitted to the mansion by a side door, and took their stations with the various paraphernalia in a room adjoining the one occupied by the suspected butler.

"Now, Walton," said the colonel, as he draped the youth in a flowing sheet and whitened his face with chalk, "remember that your name is James Wilson, and that you are to address him in the words already told you."

Teddy repeated his lesson satisfactorily, and was installed near a connecting door.

Winterbottom had retired a half-hour previously, and the conspirators could hear him snoring lustily.

When all was in readiness, the younger detective slowly tapped a sonorous-sounding bell twelve times, and at the last stroke the door was thrown open, and Teddy glided into the butler's room, accompanied by the glare of a calcium-light that had been placed near-by.

The effect was both immediate and remarkable.

Winterbottom had been awakened by the unusual tolling, and when he saw the awe-inspiring ghostly figure approach his bed, he gave a blood-curdling scream of terror, and sprang to the floor.

Now was Teddy's opportunity.

Elevating his right arm, he moaned several times, and then said, in sepulchral tones:

"John, be not afraid. It is the spirit of James Wilson now visiting you. I am sorely troubled, and cannot rest in my grave."

The listeners in the next room could hear the butler's teeth chattering from an excess of terror, and every little while a gasp as of mortal fear came to their ears.

"John, it is thou and thou only that can bring repose to my soul," continued Teddy in the same tone. "If you refuse to do what I now ask, I will haunt you until your dying——"

He was interrupted by a shriek so fierce and terrible in its intensity that even the stout-hearted detectives grew pale, then, bounding upon the enshrouded figure, Winterbottom clutched at Teddy's throat with the strength of a maniac.

When, a moment later, the two men concealed in the other room reached the door, attracted by the sound of the struggle, they instantly realized the true state of affairs.

The butler's mind had given way under the strain, and he had suddenly become a raving madman!

But no time was to be lost.

Teddy had already gone down under the force of John's attack and superior strength, and he was fast being throttled.

Colonel Coates reached the spot first, but one blow of the crazy man's fist sent him flying across the bed. The other detective was much stronger, and he soon had Winterbottom dragged from Teddy's body.

The youth was still conscious, but he was so completely exhausted that he could only gasp for breath during the succeeding few moments.

In the meantime the noise had aroused the household, and several efforts had been made to enter the room by those outside, but the door was locked.

Seeing this, Colonel Coates crawled across, and, after a number of futile attempts, succeeded in turning the key.

Aid came just in time.

Despite his muscular power, the detective speedily found that he had more than met his match in John Winterbottom.

Naturally strong, the butler's strength was increased fourfold through his insanity, and he soon had his opponent upon the floor.

Back and forth they struggled, now one uppermost, and then the other, until at last, by a herculean effort, the maniac succeeded in dashing the other's head against the wall, rendering him unconscious.

It was then the colonel opened the door.

A half-dozen servants, led by the master of the house, rushed in, and soon had the crazy butler bound hand and foot.

He was finally carried to a hospital, and the detectives, deeply chagrined at the failure of their plan, withdrew, accompanied by Teddy.

As it transpired, however, they were to gain their object, after all.

John Winterbottom was finally removed to an asylum, where, in his ravings, he divulged the names of his associates in the robbery, and also the spot where the booty was concealed.

The latter was ultimately recovered, but the cracksmen learned of their danger in time to leave the country.

Teddy Walton devoted his hundred-dollar bill to the business, but he solemnly declares that ten times that amount would not induce him to make another such strange New-year's call.

LATEST ISSUES

THE BRAVE AND BOLD WEEKLY

All kinds of stories that boys like. The biggest and best nickel's worth ever offered.

HIGH ART COLORED COVERS. 32 BIG PAGES. PRICE 5 CENTS.

253—Jolly Jack Jolly; or, Adventures of a New York Boy. By John Mack.
254—A Jay from Maine; or, The Fortunes of Reuben Green. By Herbert Bellwood.
255—Hank, the Hustler; or, A Brave Boy's Battle for Bread. By Fred Thorpe.
256—At War with Mars; or, The Boys Who Won. By Weldon J. Cobb.
257—Railroad Ralph; or, Winning His Way on the C. & M. By Engineer James Fisk.
258—Gordon Keith, Magician; or, Through the Danger Zone in Ashanti Land. By Lawrence White, Jr.
259—Lucky-Stone Dick; or, The Eighth Wonder of the World. By Weldon J. Cobb.
260—"Git-up-and Git;" or, From Flame to Fame. By Fred Thorpe.
261—Up-to-date; or, Push and Pluck Rewarded. By the author of "Wide-Awake."
262—Gordon Keith's Double; or, The Chase of the Coiners. By Lawrence White, Jr.

THE TIP TOP WEEKLY

The most popular publication for boys. The adventures of Frank and Dick Merriwell can be had only in this weekly.

HIGH ART COLORED COVERS. 32 BIG PAGES. PRICE 5 CENTS.

600—Frank Merriwell's Annoyance; or, Reckless Ralph, the Runaway.
601—Frank Merriwell's Restraint; or, The Revenge of a Redskin.
602—Dick Merriwell Held Back; or, Secret Enemies at Work.
603—Dick Merriwell in the Line; or, Given a Show at Last.
604—Dick Merriwell's Drop Kick; or, Winning on a Last Resort.
605—Frank Merriwell's Air Voyage; or, The Wreck of the "California Arrow."
606—Frank Merriwell's Auto Chase; or, The White Deer of Dead River.
607—Frank Merriwell's Captive; or, The End of the Chase.
608—Dick Merriwell's Value; or, The Game That Settled the Question.
609—Dick Merriwell Doped; or, The Mystery of the Black Star.

THE NICK CARTER WEEKLY

The best detective stories on earth. Nick Carter's exploits are read the world over.

HIGH ART COLORED COVERS. 32 BIG PAGES. PRICE 5 CENTS.

563—The Great Spy System; or, Nick Carter's Promise to the President.
564—The Last of Mustushimi; or, Nick Carter's Narrowest Escape.
565—Secret of a Haunted House; or, Nick Carter's Fight With a Ghost.
566—A Mystery in India Ink; or, Nick Carter in Search of a Secret.
567—The Plot of the Stantons; or Nick Carter Prevents the Theft of a Fortune.
568—The Criminal Trust; or, Nick Carter's Mysterious Client.
569—The Syndicate of Crooks; or, Nick Carter's Great Prison Plot.
570—The Order of the Python; or, Nick Carter Works the Third Degree.
571—Tried For His Life; or, Patsy's Terrible Ordeal.
572—A Bargain With a Thief; or, Nick Carter's Wildest Chase.

For sale by all newsdealers, or will be sent to any address on receipt of price, 5 cents per copy, in money or postage stamps, by

STREET & SMITH Publishers 79-89 SEVENTH AVE., N. Y.

IF YOU WANT ANY BACK NUMBERS

of our Weeklies and cannot procure them from your newsdealers, they can be obtained from this office direct. Fill out the following Order Blank and send it to us with the price of the weeklies you want and we will send them to you by return mail. POSTAGE STAMPS TAKEN THE SAME AS MONEY.

.....

STREET & SMITH, 79 Seventh Ave., New York. 190

Dear Sirs:—Enclosed please find.....cents for which send me:

.....copies of TIP TOP WEEKLY.....

..... " " NICK CARTER WEEKLY.....

..... " " DIAMOND DICK WEEKLY.....

..... " " BUFFALO BILL STORIES.....

..... " " BRAVE AND BOLD WEEKLY.....

Name.....Street.....City.....State.....

THE NICK CARTER WEEKLY

ISSUED EVERY SATURDAY. **BEAUTIFUL COLORED COVERS**

No other detective stories are half as interesting as those that appear in this publication. Nick Carter has been all over the world and has had experience with all kinds of criminals.

That's why, boys, his adventures holds one's interest from cover to cover. There is no brutality in Nick's make-up—he does not need it—he uses his wits. Do not fail to get the latest numbers from your newsdealer.

PRICE FIVE CENTS PER COPY

For sale by all newsdealers, or sent, by the publishers to any address upon receipt of price in money or postage stamps

HERE ARE THE LATEST TITLES:

542—Black Madge's Hobo Gang; or, Nick Carter and the Yeggman Queen.
543—Black Madge's Vengeance; or, Nick Carter's Crafty Foe.
544—A Tragedy of the Footlights; or, Nick Carter and the Temple of Vice.
545—The Maynard Woman's Double; or, Patsy's Terrific Brain Storm.
546—Three Against Fifteen; or, Patsy's Splendid Courage.
547—A Mystery of Two Passengers; or, Nick Carter Prevents a Great Crime.
548—A Dead Man at the Feast; or, Nick Carter's Very Slender Clue.
549—The House of Secrets; or, Nick Carter's Midnight Vigil.
550—The Lost Bank President; or, Nick Carter Takes a Great Big Chance.
551—Ralph Bolton's Double Plot; or, Nick Carter's Three Assistants at Work.
552—The Dare-devil Crook; or, Nick Carter Finds a Promising Clue.
553—A Mystery From the Klondyke; or, Nick Carter's Double-headed Case.
554—Returned From the Grave; or, Nick Carter's Legally Dead Client.
555—The Mystery Man of 7-Up Ranch; or, Nick Carter Against the "Brown Chet" Outfit.
556—A Bad Man of Montana; or, Nick Carter's Chase of an Outlaw.
557—The Man From Arizona; or, Nick Carter Swims to Victory.
558—Kid Curry's Last Stand; or, Nick Carter in Dangerous Surroundings.
559—A Beautiful Anarchist; or, Nick Carter's Bravest Act.
560—The Nihilist's Second Move; or, Nick Carter's Timely Interference.
561—The Brotherhood of Free Russia; or, Nick Carter's Beautiful Friend, Olga.
562—A White House Mystery; or, Nick Carter's Case For The President.
563—The Great Spy System; or, Nick Carter's Promise to the President.
564—The Last of Mustushimi; or, Nick Carter's Narrowest Escape.
565—Secrets of a Haunted House; or, Nick Carter's Fight With a Ghost.
566—A Mystery in India Ink; or, Nick Carter in Search of a Secret.
567—The Plot of the Stantons; or, Nick Carter Prevents the Theft of a Fortune.
568—The Criminal Trust; or, Nick Carter's Mysterious Client.
569—A Syndicate of Crooks; or, Nick Carter's Great Prison Plot.
570—The Order of the Python; or, Nick Carter Works the Third Degree.
571—Tried For His Life; or, Patsy's Terrible Ordeal.

If you want any back numbers of this publication and cannot procure them from your newsdealer, they can be obtained from this office direct. Postage stamps taken the same as money.

STREET & SMITH, Publishers, 79 Seventh Avenue, NEW YORK CITY.